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"A TRUMP CARD:" or, WILL WILDFIRE WINS AND LOSES.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "BILLY BAGGAGE," "WILL WILDFIRE IN THE WOODS," "MIKE MERRY," "BLACK BESS," ETC., ETC.



"DOWN!" HE CRIED. "OFF YOUR HORSE, OR YOU ARE A DEAD MAN!"

"A Trump Card;"

OR,

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CHAPTER I.

AT THE HEARTH OF THE GOLDEN LION.

A GREAT hickory "back-log" blazed and crackled on the wide-mouthed hearth of the Golden Lion inn, flanked by slabs of split oak timber, whose glowing blaze shot far up the great chimney, and sent a genial light into every corner of the ample room.

Four men had drawn up their chairs in front of the hearth, and were enjoying its genial warmth, with a double comfort for the wintry storm that was raging and howling outside.

These were the landlord of the Golden Lion—sturdy old Solomon Tims, with his velvet coat and his double chin—and three of his familiar cronies, each with a foot-long clay pipe between his lips, from which clouds of smoke curled upward, and lay like a misty curtain on the low ceiling of the room.

The Golden Lion was none of your span-new inns, with their showy fronts and glittering interiors, and containing everything except comfort. It was, on the contrary, a veteran roadside hostelry of the last century, plain, solid, and substantial, with not a particle of pretension, but plenty of comfort.

Little it cared how the storm whistled or the snows drifted outside. The fire that blazed on its huge hearth was proof against the wintry winds, and old Solomon hugged himself with the thought that there was plenty of sound-hearted oak yet on his wood-pile.

But it was not so comfortable for his cronies. The hear was waxing late, and they had to face the storm on their way home.

One of them—a slim, lantern-jawed fellow, named Joe Jonquil—shivered as he listened to a new roar of the eddying blast.

"Whew!" he ejaculated, taking the long pipe from his lips. "Don't I pity the poor rascals that's drifting around to-night! It's enough to blow the nose off of a tea-kettle's face. And snow!—Je-rus-a-lem! If it weren't for Sally Ann at home never the step would I take out of doors this blessed night."

"I'm afeared you'd find Sally Ann wuss nor ten hurricanes," replied a weather-beaten old chap at his elbow, covertly nudging Solomon. "Shiver my timbers, if she wouldn't take your top-gallant-sail right out of its yard-arms! But take an old salt's advice, Joe, and toddle home."

"I don't know as I said I weren't going," retorted Joe, annoyed by the landlord's deep-chested laugh. "What's a trifle of snow anyhow? I never heard of nobody melting—Hal-lo! what's that?"

This sudden exclamation was called forth by a rapid shower of blows on the porch in front, followed by the loud neigh of a horse.

"Hey! the house!" called a loud voice. "Look alive! Are you all dead inside?"

Solomon slowly extracted the pipe from his lip, and laid it with deliberate care on a round table at the side. He then began as deliberately to button his coat from the throat downward, needless of the renewed tattoo of blows on the porch.

"Bless us, old chap," cried Joe, in an agony of impatience. "He will kick down the front door. Do you want the man to freeze there alive?"

"There's the Black Bear three miles on," replied old Solomon, in a slow, drawing tone. "If he don't keer to wait for the Golden Lion as the best ride on to the Black Bear."

He had now got his coat well buttoned, and his broad-brimmed hat shoved down close over his eyes, and started with a heavy tread for the door, just as a second impatient cry broke upon the bloom of the night.

"Hey! Landlord! Hostler! Everybody and the cock! Am I to stand coolin' my heels here all night, and my horse blanketed in snow? Hello, the house!"

"Keep cool," replied old Solomon, in his deep bass. "I'm a-coming."

"Keep cool!" returned the angry traveler. "Well, that's easy enough, anyhow. But for a double-distilled coolness I think it would be hard to beat you."

The landlord had by this time gained the porch. Coming from his lighted room it was pitch-dark to him outside. But a cruel blast of wind took him in the face, and an eddying volley of snow whitened him from head to foot. He stumbled blindly forward, gasping for breath.

"There, take my horse," came a voice at his elbow, and he felt the reins dropped into his hand as another, loud neigh came from the impatient animal. "Get him to the stable quick, and rub him down and blanket him well; for the poor beast is shivering with cold."

Before the astonished landlord could reply, his guest had entered the house, leaving him alone in the storm, holding the reins of an invisible horse.

As soon as old Solomon could find his voice he began a loud, hoarse yell for "Jock!" "Jock!" After several minutes this was followed by the appearance of a sleepy hostler, plowing through the snow, lantern in hand.

It was with no compliments to his agility that Solomon handed him the bridle, and repeated the guest's directions. By this time his eyes had become somewhat accustomed to the darkness, and he could see that the earth was covered with a thick layer of snow, while the white flakes were yet swirling down in fleecy torrents, and the biting wind had in it a touch of the Greenland cold. It was certainly a night of bitter storm.

Meanwhile the traveler had strode into the bar-room, with a heavy, vigorous tread, and stood revealed to the curious inmates of the room. They could see little, however, but a bundle of snow-covered blanket, and a broad-brimmed hat that looked like a huge snowball.

He at once commenced a violent stamping, pounding and shaking, flinging his snow-peaked hat into a corner of the room, unfolding the blanket which was wrapped around him and flinging it into another corner, while the whole floor was covered with snow from his exertions.

The three idlers shrunk back from the miniature snow-storm, and looked eagerly to see what would emerge from the animated bundle which was making things so lively.

They were surprised to behold a well-built, broad-shouldered form, and a beardless, handsome face, flanked by thick brown hair, that hung in wet masses over his broad brow.

He was little more than a boy, though there was the resolute energy of a man in his expression, and the look of one well able to battle his own way through the world.

"It's a perfect beast of a night!" he ejaculated, in a rich-toned voice, as he took a comprehensive glance at the situation. "But a chap can't quite despair of human nature, when he sees such a jolly blaze as that got up for him. Tell the landlord to mix me up a hot toddy; I'm shivering clear down to my toe-nails."

He flung himself into old Solomon's seat before the fire, stretching out his legs till his top-boots seemed to occupy all the remaining space.

"This isn't so bad after all," he continued. "A whole-souled fire, like this, on a wintry night, makes one think the old-time chaps knew a thing or two. It's worth a dozen of your coal stoves, if only for the cheerful blink of it. Has the landlord come in yet?"

"He ain't," replied Joe Jonquil, edging round nearer to the fire. "There's some other business afoot outside, or wild horses wouldn't have kept old Solomon out in this gale."

"There's another craft come ashore to the porch," growled the old sailor. "I heered the alarm gun. He's captured old Solomon, whoever it is."

These words were followed by the opening of the door, and the entrance of the sturdy landlord, close in whose rear came an individual who at once drew all eyes toward him.

He had, unlike the preceding guest, shaken off his snow in the hall, and seemed as lacking in assurance as the other was overflowing with it.

Not, however, that there was anything peculiar in his figure, as he was of a shapely form, rather inclined to stoutness, and of medium height, though a chronic stoop made him seem shorter than he really was. He was plainly dressed, his well-worn attire appearing still more shabby from the careless way in which it was donned. His countenance was decidedly unprepossessing. His features, in themselves, were not bad, but a broad, livid scar, which extended from his right temple to the corner of his mouth, had quite destroyed any claim to comeliness. To this add a stubby beard, and straggling, unkempt hair, and we have the make-up of a by no means attractive customer.

He followed the sturdy figure of Solomon

Tims into the room, with a manner as if he were silently begging pardon for having the assurance to intrude.

"Hello, landlord!" cried his previous guest. "I thought you were stranded in a snow-heep. Come, mix me up something hot and strong—and as quick as lightning. It would take me a week to get thawed out from the outside."

"All right," returned old Solomon, more briskly. "The Golden Lion is famous for its winter-night hot punches. But, can't you give this gentleman a corner at the fire? He seems proper cold."

"Bless us, yes! Why don't he ask for it?" exclaimed the youth, rising so precipitately as to upset a couple of chairs. "I wouldn't step anybody, who's been out in that storm, from a smell at a hot blaze. And mix punch for two, landlord. This way, sir. Here's a perfectly lovely hearth to toast your shins before."

The hospitality of the young man was so exuberant that he almost dragged his fellow-traveler, who showed an inclination to shrink back, to the fire, and soured him down in one of the chairs, with more of heartiness than consideration for rheumatic joints.

"Why, certainly. Warm yourself well, my friend. Come far to-night?"

"A matter of ten miles," replied the other, in a hesitating, husky voice.

"That beats me, and I thought I had done my duty. However, I am not through my night's work yet. I must be away again as soon as my horse gets a bite. Yes, my good Boniface, that smells refreshing, at any rate."

He took the smoking mug from Solomon's hand, poured half its contents into a wide-mouthed tumbler, and offered it to his fellow-traveler.

"Here, sir, try this. The Golden Lion is famous for its punch. So says its honest host. And I reckon he's right from the fragrance of this mug."

"No, no, I won't trouble you," replied the older traveler.

"There's no trouble about it. I would be ashamed to imbibe and see you there shivering. Come, come, my friend; no mock modesty," and he shoved the steaming glass into the reluctant hand of the other.

"For my part I don't stand on such fine-pointed ceremony," he continued, lifting the mug to his lips, and emptying it of its contents in one long, breathless swig.

"There! That goes straight to a man's heart," he cried. "I feel worth two men now. Hal! my good sir, so you've emptied your goblet too! Now that's something like. That's what I call good, whole-souled fellowship."

He flung himself into a chair again, and stretched out his limbs in a satisfied way before the fire.

Yet the older traveler had not swallowed his beverage, but had taken the opportunity, while the enthusiastic youth had his head half buried in the mug, to pass the brimming glass to Joe Jonquil, with the quiet remark that:

"I never indulge."

As for Joe, a suspicious redness about his nose testified that he had no such scruples. He was at this minute slyly testing the famous Golden Lion punch in a corner, while the deceived youth settled himself in self-satisfied ease before the crackling fire.

While this was going on the third member of Solomon Tims's cronies, the one who had not yet spoken, was casting shrewd glances toward the shrinking countenance of the older traveler.

A look of doubt, followed by a knowing wink, came upon his face, as he continued this silent scrutiny. Finally he threw himself back in his seat, and took a long draw at his pipe, as if he had made some discovery that gave him infinite satisfaction.

"I am expecting a messenger, landlord," announced the young man. "If anybody asks for—Hal! what's this?"

He stopped with this sudden exclamation, and cast a surprised look toward the stranger, who had just slipped a folded paper into his hand.

This the youth hastily unfolded, and cast his eyes over its contents.

"By Jupiter, that's to the point; but I'll swear that I didn't look for it from you," he cried, with a glance of surprise at the stranger. "My horse, landlord! Snow or no snow, I must be off. Quick, old man. There's no time to lose in my business."

This order was so imperious that the landlord left the room without replying. He was followed out by his more modest guest, who seemed as if he had some private business with him.

Meanwhile the youth had wrapped himself in

his discarded blanket, pressed the wide-brimmed hat down fiercely over his eyebrows, and waited impatiently the arrival of his horse.

It was not long in making its appearance, and in a very few minutes he was gone, plunging again into the blinding snow from which he had emerged but an hour before.

The landlord returned alone into the room, where his three cronies awaited him.

"How's this?" asked Joe Jonquil, in surprise. "Where's the old fellow, with the hang-dog look, who tracked you out to the porch?"

"Gone," was Solomon's short answer.

"Gone!" echoed the third of his cronies, now first speaking.

"Gladn't he a right to!" asked Solomon angrily.

"He's arter no good," with a dubious shake of the head.

"Do you know him?" asked Joe curiously. "I noticed you twiggin' him."

"What I knows I knows," replied the other.

"I've only one thing to say, and that's, he's arter no good."

CHAPTER II.

OUT IN A BITTER STORM.

It's a reg'lar beast of a night, consarn it!" grumbled an ill-favored, roughly-dressed fellow, as he opened the door, and plunged into a hut near the road which the two travelers had just taken.

"You mought well say so," growled a second, from the chimney corner. "You've brung in cold enough and snow enough to set the whole house in a shiver, blame your pictur'!"

The interior of the hut consisted of a single room, with a low-roofed loft above it. The light of a lantern on the table showed that the building was a dilapidated structure. Indeed it seemed to have been deserted, and to be occupied now only temporarily, for the fire in the chimney was fed with some decayed boards torn from the floor, mingled with wet fagots gathered from the surrounding wood.

By the table sat a man much more presentable than his rough companions. These, three in number, were dressed in coarse pantaloons, pushed into the tops of high boots, while their upper garb consisted of thick flannel shirts. But the fourth was dressed neatly, and with even some appearance of foppishness, his coat of the latest cut, his necktie displaying the glister of a diamond pin.

He was as well marked in face. The others were rude, unkempt, ill-favored fellows, whom one would not have liked to meet alone, on a solitary road. But their leader as he seemed to be, had a keen-cut, fair-skinned visage, with a haughty expression and a piercing glance in his high-browed eyes. A thin black whisker marked the lower part of his face, while his upper lip was graced by a long but slender mustache.

He looked up with some interest, as the man entered and shook the snow from his wide-brimmed hat.

"Any news?" he asked.

"Yes. He has promised to be on hand by twelve to-night. It is a howling old storm out. But, you know him. If he says a thing once, fire and water wouldn't hinder him from going through with it."

"Twelve! He should pass here a little after eleven, in that case."

He drew out a handsome gold watch, and looked at its white dial.

"It is later than I thought," he muttered.

"Come, boys, it is nearly time we were moving. Get your traps together. We must be on guard without delay."

"Funny weather this, for Christians to turn out in," was the rebellious answer of the man in the chimney corner. "I'd let the young hound go to Jericho, if it was me."

"But it isn't you," sternly replied their leader. "And I do not see that any one is asking Christians to turn out. It strikes me that it would be hard to stir up a set of greater repro-bates."

A laugh followed this speech, as if they considered it highly complimentary. Then there was tightening of belts, donning of hats, and examining of weapons, each of the ruffianly crew seeming well provided with pistols.

In ten minutes more they had partly extinguished the fire in the old hut, closed the slide of the dark lantern, and left the building, plunging with many a shiver into the swirling snow and biting wind that ruled without.

"What in the blazes did you close the lantern for?" growled one of the men, as he scrambled up from a tumble into the deep snow. "Open

the slide and let us see where we are going. We will be diving into the brambles next."

In response the slide of the dark lantern was thrown open, flinging a ray of light in advance, which displayed a narrow path, flanked by huge brown-trunked trees. In the clear beam the flaky snow came down in white eddies, dashed into their faces by the whirling winds.

Stumbling forward, with many a muttered curse, they soon reached the side of a narrow road which here passed through the center of the forest, and was marked only by a thicker swirl of snow and a partial retreat of the close-growing trees.

"This is the spot," said the leader. "Two of you take the other side of the road. And be wide awake, mind you. He is not to pass, if we have to stop him by a bullet. But don't use your pistols if you can help it. I had rather not kill the young hound, except he gets ugly."

"What will be the signal of attack?" asked one of the men.

"A flash from the lantern. Quick! In position now. We may look for him at any minute."

"The sooner the better," was the grumbling response, as the desperadoes sought out the positions assigned them.

Silence fell upon the woods, broken only by the sigh of the wind through the snow-laden branches. The flakes continued to descend in their noiseless way. An occasional gust blew them in blinding clouds down the open road, but under the boughs of the forest they were less affected by the wind.

The ambushed villains waited impatiently, their fingers and ears nipped by the cold, while the descending snow slowly shrouded them in white drapery.

While this ambush was being prepared, the young man who had made a temporary halt at the Golden Lion, was plunging again through the fierce January storm, half-blinded by the snow, but wrapped up too warmly to greatly heed the cold.

The night was very gloomy, its only light being the faint white glare of the snow, with which the whole country was deeply covered. Only a darker shadow marked where the fences ran at the roadsides, and it was at times difficult to prevent plunging against these dimly visible boundaries.

"I would give something handsome if I could spend the night at the Golden Lion," he muttered. "It is a hundred times more comfortable to face a roaring fire than such a howling storm as this. But I promised to come through, and come through I will, if it rains cobble-stones."

For several miles his journey continued, the weather growing worse rather than better, while the cold seemed to increase as the night wore on.

"I wish I had a second edition of old Solomon's famous punches," he again remarked. "That one has lost its fire. I believe a man feels worse after the warmth of a punch dies out, than if he had not touched it. Keep up your spirits, old lass, patting his horse's arched neck. 'We have a six miles journey before us yet; but you and I have been through worse than this together.'"

A deeper gloom now marked the sides of the road, the avenue seeming like a white channel between lofty banks. They had entered the forest.

The horse galloped briskly forward, the snow here being less deep, as it was partly caught by the sheltering boughs of the trees. They had penetrated the wood for about a quarter of a mile, when a strange sound to the left caused the alert traveler to look keenly in that direction. At the same instant a narrow line of light shot across the dark road, just in front of his horse, causing the animal to halt and rear in sudden affright.

"Halt! Yield yourself prisoner, or it will be worse for you!" came a loud voice from the right.

At the same instant a rush took place, several men breaking from the shelter of the woods, and gathering in the center of the road. One of these grasped the bridle of the rearing horse.

"Down!" he cried. "Off your horse, or you are a dead man!"

"Drop that bridle, or there will be a winged footpad!" was the stern reply of the traveler, as he strove to regain control of the frightened horse.

"Seize him! Drag him down!" came the voice of the chief villain, while the light of the lantern was thrown upon the form of the young traveler, revealing him in its brilliant luster.

A rush was made toward him, but, at the

same instant, a pistol cracked in his hand, and the fellow at his bridle loosed his hold with a mingled groan and curse.

"Out of my way, hounds!" cried the traveler, spurring his frightened horse, and cocking his pistol for another shot, if necessary.

The animal dashed furiously forward, knocking down the groaning individual in front, and carrying its rider instantly well out of the line of sight.

A pistol shot sounded behind him, carrying off his hat. Another, and the horse, with a wild scream of pain, gave a savage plunge and tumbled headlong, in a quivering heap, to the earth.

"On him, men! Down with him! Don't let him escape!" yelled the leader of the ambushed party.

A quick rush was made, the light of the lantern being again thrown upon the horse. But the rider was not there, as they had expected to see him crushed beneath the fallen animal.

With remarkable agility he had flung his feet from the stirrups at the instant of the horse's fall, and leaped from the saddle. He was thrown prostrate, but the force of his fall was broken by the snow, and in an instant he had scrambled to his feet and sought the shelter of the neighboring trees.

"Two can play at this game!" he cried, as a second ball from his pistol pierced the hand of one of the ruffians, causing him to drop his weapon with startling suddenness, and to dance around in pain.

Ere the conflict could proceed further it was broken by an unlooked-for diversion. Silently, over the cushion of snow, a second horseman had come upon the combatants. A loud cry was the first intimation of his presence.

"Back, hounds! Back, cutthroats!" he ejaculated. "Release your prisoner, if you have taken him. Where are you, Mr. Wildfire?"

"Here! Safe and sound!" came back in tones of surprise from the first traveler. "Ware! whoever you are. Ware! or you are a dead man! You are under their pistols!"

His warning was too late. At that instant the gleam of the lantern fell upon the form of the horseman, revealing to the astonished eyes of the young man the figure of his late companion at the Golden Lion. At the same moment there was a keen report from the pistol of the leader of the highwaymen. The unfortunate traveler threw up his arms, with an ejaculation of pain, and fell headlong from his horse into the deep bed of snow.

The animal, almost simultaneously, stumbled over the fallen horse in his path, and fell himself, scrambling awkwardly to his feet.

One of the villains ran forward to seize this trembling and frightened horse; but he was too late. For the young man had darted with the agility of a panther from behind his sheltering tree, caught the bridle of the animal, and leaped like a cat to the saddle.

"Another game that two can play at!" he shouted, as he set spurs to the horse. "You have killed this poor creature's master, but Will Wildfire is not to be so easily laid out by a crew of villains."

Putting spurs to the horse he darted rapidly onward, bending low in his saddle, as bullet after bullet followed him in his flight.

In a moment more he had disappeared in the thick darkness, leaving the baffled and enraged ruffians alone with their dead.

CHAPTER III.

A LATE WEDDING GUEST.

It would not very well express the fact to say that the villains looked at one another with surprise and disgust. Looks would have been wasted on such a night as that, but they were by no means sparing of curses, and expressions of baffled rage.

"May Satan fly away with the young imp!" roared one. "Shoot me if he hasn't bored my hand with a bullet."

"Your hand be hanged!" yelled another. "He's cut a hole clear through my shoulder. I'm bleeding like a stuck pig."

"Why in the blazes didn't you hang on to the bridle?" demanded their angry leader. "A minute more and we would have had him. A blessed set of cowards you all are, when the wind of a bullet is enough to settle any one of you."

"The wind of a bullet, hey? It was a bit too high a wind for my liking. Anyhow I brung down his beast, and here we are with a dead horse and a dead man on our hands."

"And we'd best make tracks, quicker than lightning. He mought have the whole country down on us."

A Trump Card

"Not he," rejoined the leader. "He has other things to fry. This way with the lantern. Let's put this dead fool, whoever he is, into the woods. It might raise the hue and cry too soon to have him here."

The body of the fallen man lay half buried in a deep bed of snow. While one of the wounded villains held the lantern the two unharmed ones pushed the seeming corpse, and dragged it inside the line of bushes.

"Fling the light here, on his face," said the leader. "Let me see if I know him. He must be one of Wildfire's cronies."

The keen line of light fell upon the scarred face, which the straggling hair, and several broad smears of blood rendered unrecognizable.

The sharp eyes of the observer fixed themselves for several minutes upon the corpse-like face. He shook his head doubtfully.

"There's something about him," he muttered. "I can't make it out exactly, but I've seen a face like that somewhere. However, it don't matter. He's dead as a door nail, and dead men are of no more account than dead dogs. Come, lads. We must look to your wounds, and then get away as quick as possible. It is growing unhealthy around here. Where did you leave the horses, Jerry?"

"In the bushy hollow, back of the hut. Under the old shed, there."

"Come on, then. We will take a whiff of the fire, and look after your hurts, and then, hey for better quarters! A devil of a sharp hound, that young Wildfire. And this fellow! I have half a mind to make a sure thing of him. There's something I don't like in that face."

"Never fear him. He is past kicking," rejoined one of the men. "And too many pistol-shots may bring us into trouble. Come, we are wasting time here."

Half-reluctantly the leader turned his vicious eyes away from the pallid countenance, already half-shrouded in snow, and slowly followed his confederates toward the hut.

They were hardly out of sight and hearing before a strange metamorphosis came upon the corpse. A quick quiver threw the snow from the half-buried form, and, a moment after, he crept to his feet, standing upright in the storm and the darkness.

"Just as well for me that you didn't try to make your work sure," he muttered, "though I might have astonished you all a little if you had tried it on. I was as good as a dead man for five minutes, I acknowledge that. But Richard is himself again, now. A scarred forehead, and a smear of blood on the face, are not enough to make a funeral. Let me see; 'in the hollow behind the hut,' he said. Since that young daredevil has borrowed my horse, I cannot do better than to borrow one from our good friends here."

He made his way with difficulty through the blinding snow, feeling the borders of the path, until the light that came from the crevices of the old hut enabled him to progress more rapidly. Silently as a ghost he moved around the building, looking in at some of the wider crevices upon the unsuspecting villains. Then he disappeared in its rear, and sunk into the dense darkness.

When, fifteen minutes afterward, the crew of highwaymen emerged again from the hut, and left their way by the light of the lantern to the point where the horses had been secreted, it was with no small surprise and dismay that they found there three horses only, instead of four.

"A pretty hand you to tie up horses!" cried the leader, angrily. "You've let the best of them go astray."

"Not a bit of it," was the firm reply, as the lantern was lowered to the surface of the snow. "See here! If this isn't a man's tread, I'm a Jew! And, sure as you live, the halter's been on!"

There was a start of surprise and alarm as these facts were recognized. For a moment they looked at each other with stupefied glances, then the leader snatched the lantern and ran back.

He returned in a few minutes, a look of angry vexation upon his face.

"Just as I thought," he ejaculated. "That chap was playing on us through it all. He has come to life in a hurry, and made off with one of our horses. An infernal fool I was not to make sure of him when I had him under my pistol. We must out of this like a flash. Those two chaps may raise the country upon us."

In a very few minutes more they were picking their way carefully through the woods by the light of the lantern. The road reached, they unstrapped their half-frozen horses, one of the animals being obliged to carry double, and

passed away, in their turn, into the night and the storm.

Only the dead horse and the trampled snow remained in evidence of the late deadly struggle. And the footsteps and the body were quickly shrouded in the white garb of winter.

While these events were taking place in the depth of the storm-assailed woodland, a very different scene was playing in the interior of a neat cottage, which formed part of the small village of Dover, several miles distant from the spot of the attempted murder.

In the pleasant sitting-room of this mansion, adorned with pictures and articles of artistic ornament, sat a group of young ladies, richly attired, as if for some festive occasion. Several gentlemen were present, dressed in regulation black, yet with such care and style that they, too, seemed to have got themselves up for some special occasion.

In an elegantly-furnished bedroom, on the second floor of the house, sat two ladies, one dressed in the floating, vapory white of a bride, the other in rich blue, with orange flowers at her throat.

"It is just like him to be late," said the last-mentioned of these, a bright-eyed, beautiful girl of medium height, and with a look of mingled earnestness and dignity. "Will has vexed me more than once by his carelessness about keeping an appointment."

"But his time is not up yet," replied the white-dressed nymph, a fairy of a girl, with blue eyes and golden hair, and a face as bright as a sunbeam. "And then there's such a storm! It is not fit for a living creature to be out of doors on a night like this."

"But Mr. Wetherly is growing so impatient."

"Very well. I have no objections, I am sure," returned the little beauty, in a tone of incipient vexation. "I am afraid he may have greater cause for impatience ere he has much to do with me. I have given my promise to Will Wildfire, and I will not break it."

"And I would not ask you to for the world, you witch," laughed her companion. "I only spoke a word for poor Mr. Wetherly, and see what a storm I have raised about my ears."

"It is just like me," replied the other, contritely. "I am always making myself disagreeable. I hope you will forgive me, Clara dear."

She flung her arms around the graceful form of her friend, and looked up softly into her face, as a blush-rose might look up to a stately lily.

"Don't you love me now—just a little?" she asked, coaxingly.

"Yes, a great deal, you little tease," laughed her more sedate companion, stooping to kiss the pouting red lips.

"It is such a dreadful business, this getting married," was the pensive reply. "Sometimes there comes over me a wish that I had never seen him. To be given away, you know. It's too ridiculous."

"You would like to be a butterfly, or a rosebud, always, I doubt not," remarked Clara, smilingly. "But, that is out of the question. If you love Mr. Wetherly, Lucy, and—"

"Why of course I love him," interrupted the bride, with feverish haste, while a bright red spot came into her cheek. "I would never have promised to marry him if—I had not loved him dearly."

Clara's deep eyes were fixed steadily upon her friend's face, while a look of pitying doubt passed over her features. She seemed on the point of speaking when a sharp rap came upon the door.

She hastened to open it. In the hall outside stood a gentleman, with an expression of slight impatience upon his face.

"Not ready yet?" he asked, with an affection of surprise. "Here we are within a half-hour of midnight. And you know the hour fixed is past."

"Is that you, Robert?" queried Lucy, as she hastily rose. "Do come in. Midnight is the hour, so you will have to possess that uneasy soul of yours in patience."

The gentleman who entered in response to this playful speech, was of an erect form, with a firm, well-rounded face, and a penetrating eye. He was tastefully dressed, and of a shapely figure, though there was something in his expression that a practiced judge of human nature might not have liked.

He put on a look of playfulness as he came forward, though it probably did not express the feeling that was foremost in his mind.

"So you have decided on midnight, then?"

he questioned. "And of course everybody must give way to your imperious will."

This was said laughingly, yet not without a hidden meaning.

"I promised Mr. Wildfire, you know, that I would not be married except he was present. And he has sent me word that he could not be here before midnight. So I am bound to my promise, though I don't like that hour a bit for a wedding."

She shrugged her shoulders suggestively, as she fixed her eyes with a coaxing expression on the face of her lover.

"I should be the last to make you break your promise," he gayly replied. "Though I don't very much if Mr. Wildfire will be here. It is an outrageous night out."

As he turned half away there was a look upon his face that neither of the ladies saw, but which might have indicated that he had a deeper reason for doubting the coming of the expected wedding guest.

In the sitting-room down-stairs an impatience more outspoken than that of the bridegroom was manifested. There was more than one expression of surprise and displeasure at what they called Miss Darling's foolish obstinacy.

"If this expected guest could not be here at an earlier hour he should not have tried to come at all," said one of the vexed bridesmaids. "It is too bad to keep us all waiting."

"It is not that, but there is a bad omen in a midnight wedding," replied another.

Midnight came, but with it no sign of the loitering wedding guest. The bride no longer objected.

"I have been faithful to my promise," she remarked. "But I do not blame him if he has preferred to stay at home on such a dreadful night."

"He stay at home!" exclaimed Clara. "Not he! He will be here, unless he be utterly storm-stayed. Will Wildfire never willfully broke a promise."

"Well, he can offer congratulations to the bride, then," remarked Mr. Wetherly, with an ill-disguised triumph of tone. "We have given him the time he claimed."

Ten minutes afterward the persons present were all assembled in the parlor of the mansion, the bride and groom, flanked by their attendants, fronting the grave-looking minister who was prepared to conduct the ceremony.

The others were grouped in the room just behind them, forming a close array of interested spectators of the wedding.

The bride grew slightly pale as the grave clergyman proceeded with the marriage service. There was a bright spot in her cheek that betokened almost the hectic of fever.

The groom, on his part, stood quietly and self-sustained, though his occasional quick glances betrayed a feeling as of some secret cause of anxiety. Indeed, he violently started on hearing a sound come from the front of the house, as of some one entering. He instantly recovered his equanimity, however, and appeared intently interested in the ceremony.

Yet a new guest had entered the parlor, and stood at the rear of the group of spectators.

"If there is any who knows just cause why this man should not take this woman to wife, let him now speak or forever hold his peace."

The deep tones of the clergyman were hushed, as he waited an instant. Then to his, and every one's utter surprise, there came as deep-toned a response:

"I know cause, and just cause!"

All looked eagerly around. There stood the form of the lagging guest, the erect but youthful figure of Will Wildfire.

CHAPTER IV.

A CHAPTER OF SURPRISES.

AN indescribable confusion followed this startling and undreamed-of interruption. The bride became deathly pallid, and seemed on the point of falling. But she was sustained by the strong arm of Clara Moreland, who cast a glance of mingled anger and astonishment toward the intruder, standing there so stern but so self-possessed.

As for the bridegroom his face flushed with anger, and he took one quick step toward the intruder, as if with intent to punish him for his daring interruption. Yet an eye accustomed to read the indications of the human face might have seen a sense of dread and confusion hidden under the anger. Indeed the hasty movement of the groom was instantly arrested, as he turned and aided to support the shrinking bride.

"Who is it that speaks?" exclaimed the

clergyman. "And what cause have you for interrupting this solemn ceremony?"

"He is a villain, and an enemy of mine!" ejaculated the bridegroom. "He has come here to disturb us, and should be ejected from the room."

At this hint two or three of the young men present stepped forward, as if for the purpose of carrying out the suggestion. But the youthful intruder stood erect and unmoved, fixing upon them an eye which acted as a check upon their belligerent intentions. There was a self-possession and dignity in his attitude and expression which brought them involuntarily to a halt.

"I come not as a foe of the bridegroom, but as a friend of the bride," he responded. "I am not willing that she should be sacrificed."

"Sacrificed!" cried Clara Moreland, with a look of eager inquiry toward the speaker.

"Again, what means this interruption?" demanded the grave clergyman. "No light cause will justify this intrusion."

"It means—" began the young man.

"It means that you are a liar, and a base-born hound!" hissed the bridegroom, again springing forward. "Help me, gentlemen. Let us fling the dog from the room, and teach him that he cannot play his shabby tricks upon such as us."

His friends stepped forward in ready support. But Wildfire moved not, and hardly changed a muscle of his face. His lips only became more firmly set, and there was a dangerous glitter in his steel-blue eye.

"Hold!" cried the clergyman, earnestly. "No violence, I beseech you. Let the gentleman speak."

But there was a quicker and more effective interruption. For Clara Moreland had darted forward with the flight of a bird, and placed herself between the antagonists. Her eyes were flashing and her cheeks burning, as she faced the four men who were advancing on one.

"Back!" she exclaimed, with an imperious wave of the hand. "It is dastardly for four men to attack one. Mr. Wildfire must and shall speak. If he has reasons why this marriage should not be proceeded with, who would wish to hinder him from giving them?"

"Thanks, Miss Moreland," said Will, with a smile of gratitude. "And as for you, gentlemen, you will do well to resume your places. I have come through too much in order to reach here to-night to be so easily silenced. I have ridden through fifteen miles of this howling storm, and have escaped an ambush of cut-throats of whose purpose Mr. Wetherly may perhaps give us some information."

"If" cried the groom, fiercely, though with a paling face.

"Yes. You had good reasons to try to keep me from arriving here to-night. If it will be any satisfaction to you, I can inform you that your gang of villains have killed one man, but fortunately the wrong one. I am here safe to rescue this poor girl from your hands."

"Liar and villain!" shouted the groom, furiously. "You shall answer dearly for this."

"When and where you please," was the cool reply. "And with what weapons you prefer. But just now—"

"Oh! what is this dreadful charge?" exclaimed the bride, in a tone thrilling with distress, while her pallid face and outstretched hands were full of pitiable anxiety and dread. "Oh! do cease this terrible quarrel! It is too shocking. I cannot bear it."

"Let the gentleman speak," demanded the clergyman, in solemn tones. "Again and for the last time I ask, what charge does he bring?"

"Simply, that the lady is deceived," Will quietly rejoined. "The gentleman here is not Robert Wetherly; but an impostor who has assumed his name."

The confusion became tenfold heightened at this startling announcement. Cries of alarm and astonishment from the ladies were followed by the fainting of the bride. A hasty stir filled the whole room with excitement.

"Base liar!" vociferated the bridegroom, clenching his fists, though the look of fury on his face was immediately replaced by an expression of triumph. "You have come far to bear us a pitiable lie. I defy you to prove your assertion."

At this moment the door of the room quietly opened, and another person entered, unseen and unheard by those present in their overruling excitement.

"Has Miss Darling recovered yet?" asked Will anxiously.

"Yes," replied one of the ladies. "She did not quite lose her senses."

"I would say then that Robert Wetherly, the wealthy proprietor of Brookdale, has been for ten years past in Europe, where he still resides, and that this person, sent here as his agent, has assumed his name, through the aid of a distant resemblance, and has claimed to possess the property of which he simply has charge."

"That is easily said," returned the clergyman. "But such a charge needs proof."

"I only learned the facts a few days ago," rejoined Will. "I have here a telegram, received this evening from Geneva, from Robert Wetherly himself, which will substantiate all I have said."

He stepped forward, and presented the open dispatch to the clergyman.

"It scarcely needs all this explanation," remarked the groom, in a tone of triumph. "I am not aware of having made any claim of being the owner of Brookdale. Yet my name is Robert Wetherly, and I am the cousin of the great bugbear that you have raised. I appeal to Miss Darling if I have made any other claims."

"No, no," came the reply, in scarcely audible tones.

"Then this terrible charge falls to the ground," he triumphantly responded, stepping forward, and again taking the bride's hand. "You will please proceed with the ceremony."

Will Wildfire stood for a moment abashed. He then hurriedly spoke.

"This is a highly improbable story. Let him prove his assertion."

"I can readily do that," and the bridegroom fixed his eye mockingly upon his accuser. "I have letters here from Robert Wetherly of Geneva, addressed to myself, Robert Wetherly at Brookdale, which may be pleasant reading for any doubting Thomas. Will you examine them, sir?"

He drew a handful of letters from his pocket and passed them to the clergyman, who hastily ran his eye over the contents of one or two of them.

"It seems to be as the gentleman declares," he announced. "I have no doubt that he has a just right to the name he bears."

"Shall we proceed with the ceremony?"

"Yes, yes," from the impatient groom.

"Let the lady speak. Shall we proceed?"

"Yes," came in faint response from the pallid lips of the trembling bride.

Will Wildfire stood biting his lips in baffled anger. He had played his card and lost. He looked significantly at Clara, but she shook her head doubtfully as she resumed her place beside the bride.

"If there is any one who knows just cause why this man should not take this woman to wife, let him now speak or forever hold his peace," came again in the deep, solemn tones of the clergyman.

Another short pause. All listened in breathless suspense. It was half expected that Will Wildfire would speak again. And a response indeed came, but it was not in the deep-chested tones of the former speaker. In a husky but firm voice came the reply:

"I forbid this marriage; and for just cause."

With indignation not unmixed with terror all eyes looked around. There stood a man of much the same figure as the groom, but with bent shoulders, painfully scarred face, and dressed in the most careless and unattractive fashion.

With a start of astonishment Will recognized him as his fellow traveler of the Golden Lion, whom he fancied he had left dead in the snow at the scene of the ambush. He could not suppress a hasty ejaculation of surprise.

"I am alive you see," responded the stranger, with an odd smile, "though you did not stop to find out."

"It was not safe to stop," Will coolly rejoined. "And I had more important business in view."

"Please state your reasons for this interruption," queried the impatient clergyman. "It is shameful to distress this poor lady so, without better cause."

"My reasons are," quietly replied the stranger, "that the gentleman has been deceived. This lady is not the heiress of the Linden estate."

"Not the heiress?" cried Clara Moreland, angrily. "Who is she then, pray?"

An expression of utter surprise passed over the pallid face of the bride. The plot was indeed thickening.

As for Robert Wetherly he started, and looked with eager attention toward the speaker.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"I can substantiate all I have said" was the

quiet reply. "I am sorry for this poor lady, and would not have interfered only to prevent her being married under a false impression."

"Who is she?" asked Clara. "It seems that this is to be a night of revelations."

"It will be. The revelations are not all ended yet," spoke the stranger, with a peculiar expression. "This lady is really the younger sister of the heiress of Linden. I will not trouble you all now with the strange story of how the mistake in the heirship of these sisters came to be made, but I have the proofs here for the perusal of this reverend gentleman."

All remained in anxious suspense while he stepped forward and presented a folded paper to the astonished clergyman, who quickly opened and cast his eyes over its contents.

Meanwhile the pale and shrinking bride had been led to a chair, and was surrounded by a close bevy of her sympathetic friends. As for Robert Wetherly he stood apart, a sullen, morose look upon his face, his foot impatiently tapping the floor.

The aged face of the clergyman manifested a variety of emotions as he continued to read, perplexity, surprise, and sympathy succeeding each other upon his countenance.

"It is a strange story," he remarked, on finishing the perusal of the long document. "But I fear it is true. The statement here seems precise, and well attested. Shall I read the paper?"

"Please give us its contents," demanded Clara Moreland, impatiently.

"It seems, then, that Miss Darling has an older sister, unknown to herself. A sister who was taken to be brought up by a relative of the family residing in England. This sister has been long reported dead, from some purpose of the family possessing her. But the news of the heirship of the Linden estate has brought forth an attestation of her continued existence. As the estate was left by will to the eldest daughter of John Darling, without name mentioned, it follows that it is the property of this new claimant, on full proof of her claim to the name of Mary Darling."

"I have lost my property, but I have gained a sister," murmured Lucy, with an expression of mingled emotions. "I have often heard of this sister, and mourned her as dead."

"But I do not perceive that there is any false pretense here," remarked the clergyman. "These persons have just claims to the names they bear. They have both lost the property which it was supposed they possessed. I see no reason why the marriage should not proceed, if they desire it. Lucy Darling, will you still take this man for your wedded husband?"

He paused a minute for a reply, but none came from the pale lips of the half-fainting woman.

"Robert Wetherly, will you still take this woman for your wedded wife?"

He again paused, while the eyes of the bridegroom fixed themselves morosely on the pallid face of the girl to whom he had given his pledged love.

"No," he at length replied. "It seems we have both been deceived. I will not suffer her to become the victim of any involuntary deception in regard to my property. I free her from any troth plight to me."

He turned and walked toward the door, followed by looks of disgust and indignation at his baseness. Ere he reached the door, however, his passage was barred by Will Wildfire.

"You have yet to answer to me," said the latter, sternly. "Name your time, place and weapon."

"And suppose I refuse to fight with you?" came the cool reply.

"Then I will brand you as a coward, a liar, and a villain," Will sternly rejoined.

"Neither of which I am, and all of which I throw back in your teeth. Make it a week from to-day, at eight in the morning, on the Dancliffe meadows, and pistols," came the low answer.

Will bowed and stepped back at the close of this low-toned colloquy, none of which had been heard by the women present.

Wetherly continued his movement toward the door, but ere he reached it he was again halted by a touch upon the arm. He turned haughtily to perceive the plainly-dressed stranger who was quietly regarding him.

"Well, sir, what do you want?" he haughtily asked.

"A word in your ear, only," and the stranger whispered for a moment.

With a violent start, and a suddenly pallid face, Wetherly turned and hastily left the room, leaving all behind surprised at his marked change of countenance.

CHAPTER V.

A TRAIL THROUGH THE SNOW.

THE sun rose clear and bright, pouring its radiant beams upon the ivory-like surface of the new-fallen snow, until the whole face of the earth glistened under its pure white veil. The storm of the previous night had utterly passed, but had left its mark in fifteen inches clear depth of snow, and in a biting cold which the bright rays of the sun failed to alleviate.

Near the spot where the struggle of the previous night had taken place rode three horsemen, their animals struggling with difficulty through the yet unbroken snow. It was a dreary prospect through which they passed. On either side rose the skeleton trees of the forest, their bare limbs fringed with white, while the souging wind sent misty flakes trembling downward through the air. The sky was of a steel-blue tinter, having none of the tender softness of summer. A shiver ran through the frame of the horsemen, as they halted a moment to observe the scene around them.

"This should be near the spot," remarked Will Wildfire, who was foremost of the party. "It is lucky the snow did not last long after our struggle. If we once get on their track I fancy we can follow them."

"What is that old white bunch ahead there?" asked a tall, gigantic fellow, who rode a mighty bay. "It don't look as if it belonged to the road."

His horse, at the same moment, gave a frightened neigh, and reared as if in dread of the object in question.

"Quiet, you brute! Quiet, now!" commanded the horseman angrily. "It is not a spook, hang you! And nothing with teeth to bite you. Quiet, will you?"

Meanwhile Will Wildfire had ridden his more tractable steed.

"Aha, gentlemen!" he exclaimed. "We are on the spot. It is the horse I rode last night, the poor creature who was shot under me. She is blanketed in snow, poor devil. If I can find the chap that killed her, hang me if she shall not be revenged."

The other two had ridden forward by this time, the huge rider having conquered his skittish horse. It was easy to trace the outlines of a prostrate steed under the shroud of snow, though scarce a trace of the animal was visible.

"You can see the marks of the struggle," remarked Will, pointing to where the snow had been fiercely trampled. "The tracks seem to lead into the wood at this point."

Turning his horse he forced him to enter the narrow path into the forest. A few yards brought him to the deserted hut. Throwing the bridle on the neck of the docile creature he entered and explored the interior of the ruined habitation. Traces of its late occupancy were very evident, some sparks yet remaining in the ashes of the fire on the hearth.

Quickly emerging he followed the track of footsteps in the snow, to a deep hollow back of the hut. Here horses had evidently stood, under a ruined shed, and the track of hoofs led outward toward the road, though by another path.

"We are on one end of their trail," announced Will joyfully to his comrades, who had followed him to the hut. "This was their lurking-place. Yonder go the hoof-marks, leading to the road. And here is where they mounted. If the track only holds as clean as this we will run them down sure. Let us away, gentlemen, before either hoofs get on the snow. Their trail is now as clear as if made in butter."

Wading back through the deep snow he recounted his horse, and the three companions rode away along the forest avenue.

The tracks of the horses they were in pursuit of were well defined. Considerable snow had fallen since they were made; destroying the clear-cut marks of hoofs, but the deep impressions in the snow were only partly filled up, and a blind man could almost have followed these breaks in the broad level.

Near them were other, less defined impressions, which Will recognized as the hoof-marks of his own horse, and that of his fellow guest of the Golden Lion.

"I would give something handsome for a good sleigh," he remarked, as the horses trudged slowly onward. "This is too heavy work on our animals. We may be able to get one at the Golden Lion, if the track leads in that direction."

It was about eight o'clock on that midwinter morning, when they reached the front of this famous hostelry, and beheld the sturdy figure of Solomon Tims, resting easily against one of the pillars of his porch.

"Hollo, the house!" roared Will. "Remember me, friend Solomon!"

"Should judge you were the young sprout that stopped at the Golden Lion last night," Solomon responded, in his slow way.

"You've hit it there, old man," replied Will, amid a burst of laughter from his companions. "Can you let us have a two-seat sleigh, and a pair of horses? Our own animals are played out with the drag."

"I ain't so sure," was the slow reply. "The snow's not broken, you see, and I'm afeared to trust my critters to such fly-aways."

"Put in four horses, then," cried Will impatiently. "And we will break the snow for you. And quick as lightning, too. We are going to make them travel, my jolly host. But if we hurt them we will pay for them, and leave our own horses in pledge. Hurry up your people, now, for every minute counts when men are in haste.—And hark ye, Solomon!"

"Ay, ay," answered the host.

"Mix us up something less than a half-gallon of the Golden Lion punch. We're chilled an inch deep below the skin, and want one of your famous thawings out. Stir yourself now, old man. It's a matter of life or death."

Somewhat mollified by the last order Solomon rolled away, to give orders for the preparing of the sleigh, and to mix a stiff brewing of his favorite beverage.

In ten minutes more the three travelers were away again, the warmer for their deep draught of steaming punch, which indeed seemed necessary on that biting cold morning. Four strong horses pulled the sturdily-built sleigh which had been prepared for them, the road being far too heavy for any lighter vehicle.

Solomon wanted to lend them a driver also, but Will firmly objected.

"We have to make time," he declared, "and want no extra weight. And don't take the foolish notion into your brain that we can't drive your ferocious beasts. I'll bet you a double eagle that you have not a man about your place that can handle the reins with Will Wildfire."

"Will Wildfire?" repeated the host in surprise.

"Yes. That's the name I sail under."

"Drive ahead then, in Lucifer's name! I've heard tell of ye, and ain't afeared. But, don't quite kill the poor beasts."

Will showed his white teeth, as he laughed in response to Solomon's earnest warning. He gathered the reins into one hand, as he said:

"We are on the track of a gang of murderers, old man. If we could run them down sooner by killing a score of horses I would do it. But, as good animals are scarce, I would rather have them alive than dead. Good-by, and wish me good luck."

At the same instant he laid the whip lightly on his impatient team, who sprung eagerly forward, dragging the heavy sleigh after them as if it had been made of cork. Down the road the animals broke at full gallop, Will standing upright and grasping the reins with both hands, as he cheered them on with his voice.

"Let out! Briskly, briskly, now, my noble beauties! Step and bottom now is what we want, and the horse that first shirks is in for a dose of the whip. Let out, now! And I'll bury you in oats if you bring us within eye-shot of the runaways."

The horses, as if sharing his impatience, tore with all possible speed through the heavy snow, following the tracks which were yet plainly visible.

But it is no trifling matter to break a road through fifteen inches of virgin snow, and despite their strength and spirit the progress was not satisfactory to Will's impatient mood.

"There is one thing sure," he muttered, "they could make no faster time than we are making. But then, they have eight hours the start. Unless they stopped to rest somewhere on the road we have no chance."

"They could not have calculated on this chase," replied one of the others, a short, stout-built young man.

"Don't you swallow too much of that, Ben, my boy," returned his huge comrade. "It is a miracle if they haven't pushed, the whole night through, for the city. We have only one chance in a hundred."

"And we will work that chance to the finger-bones," rejoined Will, fiercely, as he touched the off-leader smartly with the whip.

A half-hour of this furious driving brought them to the front of another roadside inn. Here the snow had been greatly broken up by passing feet and vehicles, yet the tracks they were following continued easily distinguishable, turning in toward the house.

"They have stopped here, sure as shooting," remarked Ben. "Sheer in, Will, to the porch. It will be well to ask some questions of our host."

The questions asked elicited some very interesting information. Four men, mounted on three horses had stopped there, an hour after midnight, and had spent the remainder of the night there.

Three of them were described as roughly-dressed, dangerous-looking men, while the other had a fresh, handsome face, and was attired in the garb of a gentleman.

"Our men, for a thousand!" ejaculated Will. "They are not here yet?"

"No. They are a good two hours gone. They hired a sleigh, put two of their horses to it, and left the other as pledge for the sleigh. They are off on the Middletown road, yonder.—What's up, gentlemen, anything wrong about them?"

"Only that you've been harboring a gang of road cutthroats," Will curtly replied. "Give way, my beauties! We'll see if four horses are not more than a match for two. Lay down lively, and we'll have them yet."

The horses seemed to understand him, and to share his excitement, to judge by their telling action. The sleigh tore through the heavy snow, heaping it up, and tossing it to the right and left, as a vessel tears its way through the foaming waves. Will seemed a very Jehu as he stood upright in the front of the vehicle, his whole frame whitened by the dashing snow, while he grasped the reins firmly in one hand, and held the uplifted whip in the other.

"This is what I call life," he shouted, turning a face florid with excitement to his friends. "Talk about your sleighing over smooth roads; what is it along with wild work like this?"

He ceased speaking as the horses came to the brow of a long declivity, down which they plunged at a breakneck pace, Will leaving the reins loose, although the sleigh leaped like a feather behind them.

"It is neck-or-nothing, gentlemen," he cried. "If we are going to kingdom come on this road, it can't be helped. When I am in chase, I mean work."

"Let them go!" replied his gigantic friend. "But, look out, my boy, that they don't stumble. A fall, at this pace, would put us clean out of the race."

Will, at this warning, tightened the reins, though taking care not to check the headlong speed of the plunging animals.

The track of the sleigh of which they were in pursuit continued clearly defined, being the only vehicle, with the exception of a single wagon, which had yet passed on that road.

For an hour and a half more the pursuit continued over a very hilly country, the road being broken into frequent ascents and declivities. And it became gradually more and more broken up, as the day advanced. But the track which they were following remained clearly defined, and could not be confounded with any of the numerous crossing and parallel tracks.

Finally they found themselves on the summit of a lofty hill, from which a long outlook over the country in front was obtainable. The road was plainly marked out by its two dark lines of fences, and by the path it cut through the occasional groves that crossed it.

"Yonder they are!" cried Will, enthusiastically, as he pointed to a distant spot on the road. "Not more than two miles ahead of us, and we'll eat that up in no time. Hey! gentlemen, didn't I tell you we would run them down or burst? There's never a burst; so I fancy we'll make it a clear run-down."

"Don't halloo till you are out of the woods," returned his huge comrade. "There's many a slip between the cup and the lip. There's a brace of good old proverbs for you."

Nor was his doubt ill-placed. The road ran downward here with a sheer slope of twenty feet on the right-hand side, while the protecting fence had been broken down. A short turn at the summit led into this long declivity. With a firm pull on the right-hand reins Will guided the horses around this turn, and faced them at full speed upon the descending slope. Unluckily he had pulled too strongly upon the rein. The leading horses sheered over until upon the very brink of the precipitous roadside. Then, with a snort of dread, they leaped back at a short turn, followed by the shaft horses. The sleigh was whirled short round upon the hill-side. For an instant it ran on one runner, the other being lifted into the air. Then it overturned, flinging its occupants heavily down the steep descent, while the frightened horses ran wildly onward with the overturned sleigh.

CHAPTER VI.

A MORNING AT THE GOLDEN LION.

"There's been the very hounds to pay, last night," remarked Joe Jonquil, as he rested easily against a pillar of the Golden Lion porch. Joe was not much given to wasting his muscular power in hard work, so that the roadside inn had plenty of his company.

"Regular highwayism," he continued. "The young chap as left here last night was ambushed in the Thornton woods, and had a mighty narrow squeak for it."

"That's cobbler's news, Joe," replied old Sol, contemptuously. "Haven't you any thing to say in your bag?"

"You bet I have," Joe triumphantly responded. "The wedding as was to come off at Dover was broke up in the queerest way goin'. The gentleman was arrested for burglary, or murder, or some sich business, afore they got the girl quite tied; and the poor little critter of a girl is 'most pegged out in consequence. They say she's been amusin' herself with fainting ever since."

"I can beat you on that bit of news," replied old Sol. "There weren't no arrest. But he got a whisper in his ear, and they say he went down as if he'd been clipped by a bullet. Jist fainted dead out like a woman or a baby. But the queer part of the business is that the chap that whispered him was the identical individual who was here last night; the fellow that was too high-strung to drink hot punch; and the landlord finished with a sniff of contempt."

"The blazes you say!" exclaimed Bill Blaker, old Sol's third crony of the previous night, who was helping Joe in the laborious duty of post-propping.

"Jest as sure as you live," continued the host. "What was it you know'd about that chap, Bill, as made you let out so mysterious-like, last night?"

"No good, just you take that in," replied Bill, with a dubious shake of the head.

"I won't take nothin' in, 'cept you're goin' to let more of the cat out of the bag," and old Sol swelled with offended dignity.

Bill, before replying, looked cautiously around, with his finger warningly upon his lips. Seeing that no dangerous ears were present he continued his revelation.

"Don't blow it, fer it's no business of mine; only I reckenized that cove, at sight, for a State prison bird. I see'd him with my own eyes, in a Moyamensing cell, inside of a year. Now I leave it to the pair of ye if it ain't a queer job that an old convict is in the arresting business?"

There was a grave shaking of heads, but old Sol as gravely filled and lit his pipe before venturing to reply. When he had taken two or three long puffs, his eyes rolling and winking with deep meaning, he replied with a gravity worthy of the occasion:

"There's more things a-going on in this world than folks would 'agine, and ye can't, nowadays, allers tell a bird by the feathers he wears. It's a mighty good rule, when things looks queer, to shut your eyes and keep a still tongue. That way you don't run no risk of making a fool of yourself."

With which wise saying old Sol puffed again contentedly at his pipe, his eyes twinkling as if he felt he had got off a very good thing.

"And, by Jericho, yonder comes the sleigh back!" exclaimed Joe, "and not half as fast as it went out."

He was right; the sleigh with its four horses, had just turned a corner of the road, and was approaching the inn, at a slow trot.

But we had best go back a step in our story, and trace the experience of the sleighing party, whom we left in their rapid descent down the hill slope.

Will Wildfire, agile as a cat, lit on his feet at the bottom, bringing a bed of snow with him sufficient to break his fall. The others were not quite so lucky. Pierce Browning, the giant, had rolled down the snow-bank, carrying down a perfect avalanche, and lay at the bottom buried under six feet of his chilling counterpane.

As for Ben Huntly, he had been flung clear of the hill, landing in a deep drift at the bottom, from which now only his head and feet emerged, the rest of his body being lost to sight.

As soon as Will could move for laughing, he gave Ben his hand, and helped him to rise from his fleecy bed.

"What in the blazes has become of Pierce?" he asked, as soon as he had regained his feet. "Has he gone clear through, and come out somewhere in China?"

He was answered by the heaving of a snow-bank near them, that tossed and trembled as though an earthquake were working beneath it. This movement was followed by an upheaval of the whole mass, and the appearance of the huge form of the buried giant, who tossed the heavy snow heap from him as though it were so much swan's down. Shaking himself till the snow fell around him in a miniature storm, and spurning the fleecy gag from his mouth, he turned on Will a look of withering scorn, and ejaculated:

"May I be eternally horsewhipped if you ain't just the meanest driver that ever handled reins! Why, if I had a boy six years old under my training, who couldn't turn a corner better than that, I'd put him on dry bread and water for a month."

Will laughed at the blustering rage of his angry friend.

"You taught me the lesson yourself," he declared. "I have not forgotten the way you brought your bays down the slope to the Falls bridge."

"I didn't do it in this style," Pierce grimly responded. "Though I did make your hair stand on end. Anyhow, the chase is up for to-day. There go your horses, tearing away like mad down the hill, and it is a chance if we find a splinter of the sleigh when we catch them. It's an infernal shame, when we had the dead wood so clear on those runaway rascals. We would have overhauled them in a half-hour more."

Will made no answer, but turned for a slow trudge down the hill in pursuit of the frightened horses. It was a full hour before they were overtaken. They had plunged down the road and over a bridge at its bottom, but had slackened their speed on the steep ascent opposite, and had been stopped by an inhabitant of the small village at its summit.

But the distance was nearly two miles from where they had been overturned, and it was a long, dreary trudge through the deep snow. They found the sleigh unharmed, it having righted itself after spilling out its occupants. But further pursuit was useless. The fugitives had far too great a start, and the road, which was now approaching the city, was too much cut up by vehicles for a single track to be any longer traced. Turning the horses they made their way in slow disappointment back to the Golden Lion.

"What luck?" asked old Sol, taking the long pipe from his mouth. "I don't see you're fetchin' back more nor you took out; four horses and one sleigh. Road too heavy, I s'pose."

"Yes; and the hills too confounded far from top to bottom," ejaculated Pierce. "There's no use mincing matters, landlord. Our Jehu, Will Wildfire here, managed to upset the whole concern, and spilt the three of us into a fifty feet deep snow bank. There's the whole story in short meter. Mix us another noggin of punch, landlord. Quick, hot and strong. I must have something to relieve my feelings."

His two friends followed, laughing, into the bar-room, where Pierce flung himself heavily upon a seat, that cracked and groaned with his weight.

"I want to hear the whole of this business," he remarked, when their potent draught was placed steaming before them. "How came you to interfere in the Wetherly and Darling wedding? And what was the object of these highwaymen?"

"That's what is puzzling me," followed Ben. "It was no right for any ordinary bit of waylaying."

"It wasn't that," replied Will. "The fact is, that I have been for some time on the track of this rascal. And he knew it, too. I caught an inkling that he was playing off Robert Wetherly's property on false pretenses. After a good deal of trouble I found out where Wetherly was residing, and telegraphed to Geneva for the truth. I received an answer, proving this man to be an impostor, but it was just three days on the road, thanks to your Atlantic telegraph. However, I had made little Lucy promise to wait for me till midnight, and I rode on here to the Golden Lion, to which the message was to be forwarded. I took to the road again as soon as it came in. But a lofty old ride it was, through that storm."

"He knew of your plans, and stationed that ambush to waylay you?"

"I fancy so."

"But why should he take so much trouble, when he could afford to defy you at the wedding?"

"That's a part of the business I don't quite see through," replied Will, sipping at his glass.

"I can clear it up for you perhaps," came another voice, faintly familiar to Will.

They all looked hastily around, and saw the same ill-dressed bent figure, and scurred face, which had taken so prominent a part in the events of the previous night.

"You here!" exclaimed Will, with a stare of surprise.

"Robert Wetherly fancied you knew more than you did," continued the speaker. "How thought you were on the track of another business, which you will excuse me for keeping secret. He simply laid his ambush for the wrong person; but came very near getting the right one, when that bullet plowed a groove across my cranium."

He removed his hat as he spoke, and revealed a red furrow through his hair.

"A devilish narrow escape," remarked Will, looking curiously at the speaker. "I would never have suspected that you had so sharp a thorn for this honest gentleman's conscience. I would like consumedly to know what it all means, but of course I do not want to pry into your private business."

"You shall know in time. The affair is not ripe yet," replied the mysterious stranger.

"What I wish with you is to warn you to be on your guard against him. You challenged him last night, but I fear he will not give you the chance for a fair duel. Beware of treachery from this man."

"I don't fear him," replied Will boldly.

"And I am ready to meet him, with sword or pistol, pick-ax or knitting-needle, any weapon he may select. If he wants satisfaction out of Will Wildfire he will find him always ready for any sort of attack, fair or foul."

"If we had but captured his associates; or even found out who they were," ventured Ben Huntly.

"They? Oh, they are small fish. As for who they are I know them better than they fancy. I had my eye at the cracks of the door last night, before I borrowed one of their horses."

"Good for you!" cried Will, springing excitedly up, and grasping his strange friend by the hand. "Who are they? Put me on their track, and I'll promise to save you from further trouble with some of them."

"No, no," replied the other, fixing his eyes with a cool expression on Will's flushed face. "It is not the time yet for you to know them. You are too hasty to deal with men like these. Take my advice. Be on your guard against Robert Wetherly. I will take care of your other foes."

He turned quickly and walked from the room. In a minute more the tramp of a horse's hoofs was heard without, in the clear space in front of the porch. The three friends remained gazing at each other in silent astonishment.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MEET AT THE ROSE TREE.

It was the morning of the 4th of February. There had been some warm weather since the date of the January storm just recorded, and every trace of the snow had disappeared, save some stray remnants in deep pockets of the hill-sides. The weather was now clear and frosty, and the ground well hardened by the breath of the wintry winds.

On the porch of a beautiful cottage, on the edge of the village of Dover, Will Wildfire and Clara Moreland walked leisurely up and down in the bright winter sunlight. Their hands were clasped in each other as they walked, and their eyes met with a look of warm affection. It would have been evident to even a passing observer that those two souls were linked in one by the ardent bonds of love.

But their conversation was, just now, of another such subject. They had much more practical objects in view.

"The meet will take place then on Monday?" she eagerly asked, her eyes sparkling with anticipation.

"Yes; at the Rose Tree Inn. The huntsman has found the lair of that cunning old fox, which so cleverly threw the hounds at the last hunt. We intend to give the shrewd rascal a sharp dash for it, if the ground is in condition for a run. He will have to be wide awake if he saves his brush."

"And are there any ladies entered?" she eagerly queried.

"Several, I believe. I hear mention of Miss Johnson, and of that dashing rider, Miss Blakel Morton."

"Then I am going to join the chase," enthused Will. "I have not had a good ride since that steeple-chase last autumn, and I have

that Selim will not be easily distanced in the field."

"That he won't," returned Will. "It is a rough country, though."

"So much the better. What horse will you ride? Black Bess?"

"Black Bess! Why the creature would be good for nothing after such a break-neck dash as we are likely to have. She is only fit for the race-track. Warrior is the best horse I have for such rough-and-tumble work as a fox chase. I think I shall make him my mount."

They continued their walk up and down the porch, their conversation verging now to more personal subjects.

"And so little Lucy is coming around all right again," remarked Will, after a short interval.

"Oh yes! It was a dreadful shock, you know. And she is very sensitive. But, between us, I fancy that in her quiet little soul she is glad that it turned out as it did. I believe she would have broken the match herself, if she had dared. She did not love the man half so much as she feared him."

"Then I am glad I had a hand in breaking it. I wish, though, that I knew more about the stranger who took so prominent a part in the business. There is a mystery about him I cannot fathom. I am sure he is not the common person he seems. By the way, Clara, he has warned me to be on my guard against Robert Wetherly, who, I suppose, owes me no good will."

"Oh! I hope you are in no danger from him!" she excitedly exclaimed, halting and fixing her eyes on Will with a look of alarm. "He is a treacherous foe. I know he is. You must be very careful. Promise me, Will, that you will not expose yourself to any danger?"

"Why, you nervous child, I don't fear him any more than I do yonder cat. As for getting myself in a fret about his threats, I have come safely through too many perils to begin now to tremble."

"But you are so heedless and trusting. You know you are." She placed both hands on his shoulders, and looked beseechingly into his face, her own lips trembling. "Dear Will, you are worth a hundred such men. I beg, for my sake, if not for your own, that you will not expose yourself."

"Why, you fearful little goose! Of course I shall take care of myself. If I don't you will be taking up arms for me next, and then I pity my foes! It is not everybody who has so lovely a defender."

He threw his arm around her waist, and drew her to him, imprinting a kiss on the soft lips, that trembled with fear for his safety.

"I am a free agent yet, at all events," she responded, pushing him playfully away. "There is more than a week still to pass before the day of our marriage, and I have to take good care of you during the interval. I am not going to lose you, Will."

He kissed her again, with warmer urgency than before.

"You can trust in my star, sweetheart. I was not born to be killed by a cutthroat. Maybe, though, he may conjure up some plan to break off our marriage as I did his. Suppose he proves, for instance, that I am not Will Wildfire, but only plain Jack Smith, masquerading under a false name?"

"And that I am not Clara Moreland, but Jerusha Leland, and am deceiving you about my claim to the great Sandbarren estate?" she laughingly rejoined.

"It wouldn't work, love. I would swear that you were all the estate I wanted."

"And I, that it was you and not your name I was marrying."

A merry laugh followed. They little thought, those trusting young souls that a more fatal bar would be raised against their marriage than that which had divided Robert Wetherly and Lucy Darling! If they could have seen what was in the future for them; they would hardly have continued their walk in such joyful hope and contentment.

But we must leave them in the joy of their fresh young love, and step forward a few days in time, to the date fixed for the fox chase, in which they had both determined to take part.

The weather had considerably moderated, and the hard-frozen ground had softened under the mild February sun, though not sufficiently so to produce a layer of mud. The sky was slightly overcast. The wind being moist and southerly. "An elegant day for the scent to lay," as the old huntsman announced to the throng of ardent sportsmen assembled in front of the Rose Tree.

This old-fashioned inn, noted in that part of

the country as a favorite resort for sportsmen, and the scene of many an eager fox-hunt, was attended this morning by some twenty or thirty well-mounted lovers of that famous sport, a number of ladies, enlivening the scene with their bright faces and gay attire, while the gentlemen, many of them with green or crimson coats, added to the brilliancy of the scene.

Leashed in the shed near the inn a well-filled pack of fox-hounds, eagerly whining, or impatiently "giving tongue," yielded a foretaste of the sport which would be experienced when they got in full scent of the flying fox.

Among those present was the gigantic figure of Pierce Browning. Heavy as he was, and fond of taking his ease as every one reported him, he was still fonder of sport, and never allowed an opportunity for its enjoyment to escape him. He sat a horse of mighty size, a huge, yet clean-built animal who seemed well able to carry his heavy mount, over field, fence and flood.

Pierce had ranged himself beside a bright-eyed, fresh faced little beauty, from whose cap waved a long white feather, and who sat her blooded chestnut horse with a grace that could not well have been surpassed. She was the young lady of whom Will Wildfire had spoken as "that dashing rider Mabel Morton."

"Where is your other self?" she laughingly asked. "Your shadow, Mr. Wildfire? He don't surely mean to let the hounds be thrown off without his presence?"

"He will be here," replied Pierce. "At least he promised to. But as for your shadowy remark you are not doing me justice. Why I have hardly set eyes on the man since—"

"Since when?" seeing that he hesitated.

"Since he upset a sleigh full of good companions, and flung us down a fifty foot hillside into a snow-bank at the bottom."

"I have heard of it," she gayly laughed.

"And of how Mr. Browning was buried so deep that not a hair of his head remained visible."

"Words are too weak to express it," rejoined Pierce, with a comical shrug of the shoulders.

"It was one of those situations in which the law gives a man the privilege of swearing. However, my eloquence was bottled up in snow. I had to keep mum, and take it out in expressive thinking.—But, what is the talk to-day? Is there any chance of a fox?"

"So they say. I am told that at least a half-dozen earths were stopped last night. There are bound to be some foxes cheated of their earth-holes, and we hope to find some kenned in the covert below the hill yonder. The huntsman has an idea he can rouse that long-winded fellow that threw the hounds last week. If he does we are in for a famous run."

As she spoke the person concerning whom the fair Mabel had questioned was rapidly approaching, through a strip of woodland that bounded the horizon to the East.

He was driving a light buggy, in which sat with him his fair fiancée, Clara Moreland.

"We will have to hurry up," remarked Will, "or the hounds will be uncoupled before we reach the hunt. I am glad I have my fair protector with me," he continued, looking keenly around, "for this would be a rare place for an ambush."

Indeed he was in more danger at that moment than he dreamed of. They had reached the bottom of a declivity, beyond which the road again ascended, while a flowing stream here crossed the road. On each side of it the bushes grew thick and tangled, while a broken mass of rocks broke through the soil at one side of the stream.

These rocks, half covered by the bushy growth, furnished a dark cover, behind which, at that moment, a man lay, with his eyes fixed upon the approaching carriage, while the long barrel of a rifle protruded half through the masking bushes. A sound of satisfaction came from the man's lips on seeing who approached. He cocked the threatening weapon, and waited impatiently for the approach of his intended victim.

He was so close, indeed, that he plainly overheard Will's remark. At the same instant his eye glanced with deadly aim along the sights, and his finger touched the trigger.

At that minute death hovered over Will Wildfire, all unconscious as he was. But, destiny had not yet cut the thread of his fate. The intended murderer had made one error. He was on the left of the carriage, and Will was partly sheltered from danger by his fair companion; and at this instant, as if by some divine impulse, she playfully threw herself before him, covering him with her protecting arms.

"If I am to be your fair protector," she

laughingly exclaimed, "I know no more dangerous spot than this dark glen. Drive on rapidly, Will, while I serve as your shield against peril."

Laughing at her impulsive action, Will touched his horse shrewdly with the whip. The animal sprang briskly forward, and in a minute had drawn them out of the threatening peril, through which they had so unconsciously passed.

With a bitter curse the assassin lowered his weapon, muttering:

"Fiends take the woman! It is not her life I want. She has balked me of my vengeance. Shall I send a bullet through the back of the carriage?"

He raised his rifle again, with a half-intent to do so; but at that moment the horse whirled around a short curve in the road, and the travelers were safely beyond the danger with which they had been so unconsciously threatened.

Ten minutes after they drew up in front of the Rose Tree, and were receiving the warm greetings of their friends.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PACK IN FULL CRY.

"How soon are the hounds to be thrown off?" asked Will. "I was desperately afraid I should be too late."

"Within a half hour. But where are your animals?"

"They are here, all safe. In the Rose Tree stables. I had them sent over last night," he answered, as he accompanied his fair companion into the hotel.

In less than a half-hour they reappeared, Will dressed in a handsome suit of blue cloth, that set off his fine figure to great advantage, while his mount was a deep-chested gray horse, of fine action and proud bearing.

Clara was dressed in a purple riding-robe, that showed to great advantage on the jet-black skin of her horse Selim, an animal well known in that country for his great speed and daring action. It was not the first dashing race through which his rider had taken him. As for her she was radiant with expectation, her face flushed to a vivid rose hue under the pure white of the plume which adorned her close setting hat.

"You are none too soon," warned Pierce. "It is past ten now, and our friends are pushing toward the covert, which lies just beyond that bit of meadow. But, excuse me. I fancied you two ladies were old acquaintances."

"So we are," smiled Clara, taking Mabel's outstretched hand. "It will not be the first time we have followed a fox together."

"And I fancy we will not be the last in at the death," laughed Mabel, with a roguish glance at the gentlemen, as they set their horses in motion toward the field.

The huntsman was already on the edge of the covert with the restless and impatient hounds. He was attended by the whipper-in, and the gentlemen and ladies who were to take part in the hunt, besides a goodly show of mere observers, who had been attracted by the bare mention of a fox-hunt, and were eager to see the hounds "throw off."

Before them was a narrow thicket of low underbrush, traversed in its center by a fence, and a flowing stream. It was in this covert that the fox burrows had been found, and the "earth stopping" performed, and from which they confidently hoped to rouse some cunning representative of the good old family of Reynard.

Just as our friends reached the field the huntsman had cheered his dogs into the close covert, with the familiar cry. "In there, good dogs! Eu in! Eu in there! Have him up, beauties!"

He rode after them into the covert followed by the "whip," the mounted gentlemen and ladies remaining outside, and waiting with eager impatience the first cry of the find. The master of the field, a stout gentleman but an earnest hunter, named Roger Coverdale, arranged the hunt, while the dogs were eagerly making their way through the cover with an occasional impatient, snapping bark.

With every eye alert, and every hand firm on the bridle, restraining the horses, which were quite as eager for the dash as their masters, they listened to the cheering shouts of the huntsman to his hounds, the well-known cry of "Yoicks, yoicks, have at him! Push him up! Fetch him, good dogs!"

One or two of the gentlemen were now allowed by the master to ride forward into the covert, to aid in finding the fox, which seemed to be keeping close to his kennel. The others were stationed at various points about the field.

ready for the break when the hounds should give tongue.

Will and Pierce, with their two lady friends, were stationed at the right of the field. Here a panel of the fence had been taken down, so as to facilitate the first break on the track of the hounds.

"It seems to be a hard find," remarked Pierce restlessly. "The scent ought to lie well on a morning like this. I doubt if there are any foxes in that cover."

"It was there we raised the one that escaped us in our last hunt," replied Mabel. "He has very likely returned to his old lair."

"You are too impatient," Will laughingly broke in. "If you had a cigar, and a post to lean against, we would have you praying the fox to stick to his burrow."

"Oh! I grant you that," rejoined Pierce, with an expressive shrug of his great shoulders. "Circumstances alter cases, as we used to write in our copy-books at school."

"Hush!" cried Clara, holding up her hand with a warning gesture. "Hail there it is! There's the signal of a find!"

She had heard an anxious whine or whimper from an old hound, who was coursing through the part of the covert near where they were stationed. Other hounds instantly ran to his side, and in a minute half the pack were following the scent which the experienced old fellow had discovered.

Back and forth they ran through the close thicket, occasionally giving tongue, and cheered on by the urgent calls of the huntsman. Yet the finding a scent is by no means the finding a fox. This one had evidently "run his foil," as the technical term goes; that is, had doubled back and forward on the same track till the hounds were completely baffled.

The whole pack was now running somewhat wildly through the covert, following the puzzling scent, while the huntsman and his aids were working their horses through, in hopes of pushing the cunning brute from his close cover.

Will had ridden forward to the fence, so as to command a view of the other side of the thicket, at which side the whipper-in was also stationed, on the look-out if the fox should "break cover."

He had hardly reached this point when he saw a small, grayish, sharp-muzzled creature, covered with a thick fur, and displaying a long, bushy tail, steal from the thicket, and start with a quick, crouching motion across the field in front. The fox had broken cover, unseen by the "whip," whose eyes were directed to the opposite quarter.

But, Will was too well acquainted with the etiquette of the field to give too soon the "view halloo." A fox will often turn back and seek cover again, if any unusual noise is raised too suddenly behind him. The eager observer restrained himself, therefore, until the animal was half-way across the field, and had exchanged his first creeping movement for a quick leap that carried him rapidly away.

Then the impatient hunters heard, in Will Wildfire's clear, ringing tones, the well known view halloo.

"Hon-y! hou-y! Tally ho! Gone away! Gone away!"

This loud, thrilling, long-drawn call rung like the tones of a trumpet through the field, stirring the warm blood in the veins of the ardent sportsmen, and followed by a quick response from the huntsman, who blew his horn to collect the hounds.

"Steady, gentlemen! Steady!" cried the master, riding briskly across the field. "Hold back, till the hounds have been laid on. Steady now, I beg you."

Meanwhile the whipper-in was driving out lagging members of the pack, the huntsman settling them on the scent, which Will pointed out, and all was restless bustle and confusion about the eager field.

"Keep back! Keep back! Let the hounds settle to!" cried the master, riding earnestly before the eager line of horsemen. "Hang it, gentlemen, do you want to follow the hounds, or have them follow you? Keep back, or the day will be ruined!"

"There they burst! There's the cry!" cried an eager sportsman, as twenty couples of hounds made the air thrill with the ringing music of their voices, and the whole pack broke away at tremendous speed, on the scent of the fox, which had already vanished from sight in the distance.

Simultaneously the crowd of eager hunters broke away. Some well up with the hounds, others lagging behind, but all driving impetuously in the rear of that ringing music which thrilled so richly through the wintry air.

"Where is the fox?" asked Pierce, as our

friends rode together across the broad meadow in front.

"Heaven knows. He went for the hedge yonder; but it would not be easy to follow the cricks and turns of a fox's track except with the help of a dog's nose. How well the hounds run, with their heads up, as if they were running by sight instead of scent."

"Yes," answered Mabel, as she touched her horse with the whip. "They own the scent breast high yet. It is easy for the pack to carry a good head, while the scent lies burning. After a mile or two, when the scent grows cold, you will not find them with their heads to the sky. But here we are, gentlemen. Here's the first proof of your valor. Not a very heavy one, though," she continued, with a laugh, as they faced the low hedge which was the first obstacle to the hunt.

The hounds and their immediate attendants were already across. With an easy skill Mabel lifted her blooded chestnut to the leap and was over it like a flash. The others followed without a moment's hesitation, and were in a minute more racing across a broad pasture field, that descended rapidly toward a wide brook which ran brawling at its bottom.

The hounds were already across this water, and breasting the opposite ascent, while the foremost riders were half-way down the hill. The first tremendous pace was not yet broken, and the whole hunt streamed onward at racing speed.

Across the brook at a lively gallop went the mettled horses, in the first eager impetus of the burst, leaping the water at a bound, and breasting with fresh ardor the opposite hill. Before them was the long line of hounds, now stretched out, and running, still "with their noses in the air," at a telling speed, while their musical bay made the ear thrill and the heart leap with excitement. Close beside them rode the huntsman and the whipper-in, the latter having yet no occasion to use his lash on lagging or straying hounds. At a short distance behind again came the troop of sportsmen, dashing at a ringing pace over the brook, and already stretched out into a long line, in the foremost files of which could be seen the flowing plumes of the lady riders. As for the fox he had disappeared in the far distance; but only for a time. He would have to be cunning indeed to escape his ardent pursuers.

"Hail I fancied that Master Fox would not face that hill!" cried Will, as the chase veered and ran at an angle along the hillside. "He has no fancy for wasting his strength in climbing—Look! the cunning brute is heading for the strip of woodland. There are going to be some smashed hats if we have to ride under those limbs."

"Is there no safe way through?" asked Clara, anxiously.

"Oh yes!" replied Mabel. "I will find you a path where you need not brush a feather of your plume."

Several of the horsemen had already entered the wood, in close pursuit of the hounds. As our friends approached, a footman, who stood just within the edge of the grove, intently observing their approach, turned with a look of satisfaction, and plunged deeper into the wood. It was the same man who had already aimed at Will Wildfire, from behind the rock, on the road to the Rose Tree.

He still bore the rifle in his hand, and dashed with a crouching motion back into the thicker depths of the grove, to where a dense growth of bushes bordered the stream. Yet, quick as he was, he had not escaped observation. A horseman who was riding in that direction saw him, and turned his horse toward the spot at which he had disappeared.

"Look out for eyes and hats now! Stoop, or that bough will sweep away your tiles!" cried Pierce Browning, bending to his horse's neck, as the chase swept into the forest.

But the dangerous limb against which he warned them was not repeated. Mabel had led them into a narrow cart track through the grove, which they followed with ease. It wound downward, approaching the stream at one point of its course.

Again danger threatened Will Wildfire. The foe, who had already sought his life that morning, lay crouched in the hazel thicket, at the point where the road approached the stream. With ready weapon and alert eye he waited with murderous patience until the unconscious riders should have passed his place of ambush.

"Ah! there's sunlight ahead," announced Will. "We shall be in the open in a minute more."

His words were echoed by the sharp report of

a rifle, the ball from which whizzed past so near his cheek that he felt the wind of it on his face. Simultaneously there came a fierce crashing of timber, and the tones of a loud voice raised in warning.

"Stoop! to your bridles! on your lives! Hold, you murdering villain, or I'll ride you down!"

CHAPTER IX.

IN AT THE DEATH.

It may be imagined that our friends were not long in reining up their steeds, and turning toward the locality of this strange alarm. As they did so a horseman came thrashing through the hazel thicket that lined the brook, and rode up to them.

"A narrow escape," he cried. "The villain had point-blank aim on you. But I drove my horse on him and disconcerted his murderous project."

"Who is he? Can we ride him down?" exclaimed Will, his face flushing with quick indignation.

"No. He plunged down the brook, under the thicket of braubles. It is useless to follow him in a place like that."

Something familiar in the tones arrested Will's attention. He looked quickly at the speaker. That unsportsman-like dress! That livid scar! It was the mysterious stranger of the Golden Lion!

"You again?" cried Will. "You haunt me like a destiny. Did you recognize this crouching rogue?"

"Yes. He was one of the men of the hut. But he has given you the slip. Away, or you will lose the fox also."

"By Jove, that's true!" exclaimed Pierce, quickly wheeling his horse. "Come on, friends. A miss shot hurts nobody, and we have the fox to run down."

They all wheeled and followed him, Will casting one expressive glance back at his warning friend, who remained motionless on his horse until they were out of sight.

On reaching the open ground again it was found that the chase had made much progress during this interval. Not a horse or a hound was in sight, though the musical clamor of the latter could be heard from behind the flank of a hill that sounded away some distance in advance.

"Holck away! Yonder they go!" yelled Pierce. "Push ahead lively and we will be on them."

"No, no," cried Mabel, shaking her head, and breasting her horse at the hill in front. "The fox has doubled at that turn. We will make a short cut over the brow, and down upon them like a breeze. Follow me!"

Yielding to the advice of their experienced leader they drove at a rapid pace up the hill, and in a minute more stood on the summit of an elevation, which commanded a wide and noble prospect.

Before them lay a broad, grassy valley, intersected with fences and ditches, hedges and stone walls, while down its bottom ran a winding creek, ranging from eight to sixteen feet in width. The valley was dotted with numerous farm-houses, and some plowed fields betokened the autumn labors of the husbandmen.

Mabel was right. The fox had taken a sharp turn around the flank of the hill, and the chase was streaming along in the valley below them, the huntsman urgently cheering his hounds, who seemed to have struck a "cold scent," while the whipper-in was lashing some straying dogs to their duty.

As for the hunters they were straggling over a line half a mile in length, some taking every leap that offered, and keeping well up with the hounds, others following a side road that led near the run, while one or two were leading their limping horses, disabled by a fall.

"Yoi, Merrylass! Hear the music of her voice," cried Mabel, as the bay of a hound came up the wind. "And there goes Rosamond. I would know their voices in a millen. Come on, gentlemen. We will be at the heels of the hounds in a jiffy."

She presented a charming picture as she drove her horse at full speed down the decline, her bright eyes flashing, her flaxen hair, which had escaped its confinement, streaming on the wind, while she sat her springing chestnut as though she had been born to the saddle.

Nor was Clara less lovely as she urged her jet-black Selim forward, reaching in a dozen of his long strides the side of her enthusiastic friend.

A look of admiration passed between Pierce and Will. They gathered their bridles, and darted at a vigorous pace in the track of their charming leaders.

"Hoick, and away!" came in Pierce's stentorian tones. "Have at them, beauties! Have at them!"

This ringing call was heard even by the distant hounds. Down the hill the four excited friends dashed, side by side. Yet it was no easy journey. Here a fence, there a bushy ravine, crossed their path. But these obstacles stopped them not for an instant. Rising, as with one will, they crossed the fences in full gallop. The bushes yielded and closed behind the impetuous dash of the steeds. In five minutes they were in the valley, well up with the hounds, and in the front ranks of the chase.

"Yoi! Tally ho! Forward! Hoick! Hoick!" yelled Pierce, whose blood was now fully up.

A chorus of shouts followed, from the other hunters, to encourage the dogs, who seemed to have trouble to take up the scent.

"Have at him, Merrylass! Break in, Parson! Hoi, good dogs! Lively, sweethearts! live-ly!"

The huntsman was blowing his horn, waving his cap, and trying every means to encourage the dogs, who seemed to be greatly at fault. They ceased giving tongue, and suddenly stopped, throwing up their heads, and huddling into a confused mass.

"Keep back!" cried the master. "Give the hounds a chance! They are at fault. What is it, Joe! Has he taken to earth?"

"I think not," replied the huntsman. "Most likely he has headed back. He was running down wind here, you see, and no wise fox will keep that up long. Shall I take a cast for him?"

"Yes. The hounds do not seem able to pick him up."

Blowing his horn, the huntsman "lifted his hounds," as the technical phrase goes, and took a cast round the spot where the scent had failed, cheering them on as he did so. His circles grew wider and wider, till at length a whimper from the shrewd old hound Rosamond, showed that she had "bit off" the scent. A cry from the tongues of the whole pack followed, and in a minute more they were streaming down the valley, in a direction almost opposite that before pursued.

As the horsemen followed at full speed, a single equestrian was visible, a half-mile in advance, leisurely pursuing the track the hounds had now taken.

"Who is that chap?" cried the master. "He is a rascally shrewd fellow, whoever he is. He is wise enough to know that the fox would not long face the wind, and let it carry his scent back to the hounds."

Whoever he was, he rode slowly on, waiting the coming of the hounds. Yet it was no easy country through which the chase now led. Fences, hedges and ditches intersected it at frequent intervals, while they were approaching, at a sharp angle, the creek that traversed the bed of the valley.

Now came the trial of the horses. It was the heaviest piece of country they had yet met. But our four friends still kept well up with the hounds. Over fence and ditch they went, almost side by side, their well-trained horses making nothing of some very heavy leaps.

But all the field was not so fortunate. It was being gradually thinned out by falls and balks, while a good dozen were making their way along the adjoining roads and lanes.

"There they go!" cried Mabel, in her musical voice. "There's Jack Gordon down. Under his horse, as I live! No, no! well done! He is on his feet and has him up again. And see the fat man in the green coat. He will never take that hedge! See! see! A balk!—a clean balk!"

"And yonder goes Harry Miller in the ditch. The horse is down on him. Shall we help the poor devil?"

"No, no," ejaculated Mabel, with her ardent fox-hunting spirit. "There is plenty of the philanthropic brigade behind. On, on! the fox is our game."

They went like a shot through the hedge which had checked the fat man, leaving it to close up behind them, and were away on the heels of the hounds, which were here running slowly again on a cold scent.

"There's that chap again who headed the field," cried the master. "See how neatly he takes his leaps. I never saw a better rider. Who under the sun can he be?"

They were now much nearer him, and Will, at a glance, recognized the horseman of the woods, the scarred stranger whom he seemed destined to meet at every turn. Who could he be? The mystery was deepening around him lay by day.

"When I first saw him at the Golden Lion, he sneaked in like a disconsolate tramp who

was half afraid of being kicked out. And here he is now leading the field with the best, and taking fences and ditches like a thorough hunter."

"Something mighty odd about him," replied Pierce, shaking his head. "I would give that fox's brush to find out who he is."

"You must take the brush first," laughed Mabel. "Ha! do you see that?"

She pointed to a field at a considerable distance ahead, where a flock of sheep was gathering in a peculiar manner, much like a troop of cavalry preparing for the charge.

"We are gaining on Sir Reynard," she announced. "Poor fellow, he is trying to hide among the sheep, and has given the silly things a start."

But, even as she spoke the hounds were again at fault.

"What is it?" asked the master, riding forward.

"Taken to earth, I've a fancy," replied the whipper-in, as he pointed to a hole in the bank, that looked like the entrance to a fox burrow.

"Not so!" Mabel eagerly announced, pressing her horse forward. "Do you not see the sheep yonder? He is in the flock, or has been there."

As she spoke there came from the distance a cheering "Hark! Halloo!"

The hounds raised their heads, and some of the younger dogs started in the direction of the call. The cry was repeated. It came from the stranger, who had ridden forward to the sheep-field, and who now stood in his stirrups, pointing forward. There again came up the wind his cheering "Hark! Halloo! Stole away! On, hounds! On, good dogs!"

In an instant the whole pack broke away, and ran with open mouths toward this stranger. Ere the huntsman could come up, he had them on the scent again, and their loud bay announced to the field that the fox was again found.

On, on again, with an exhilaration scarcely tempered by their sharp spurt. Reynard was now heading across the valley, and a few minutes' ride brought the hunt to the verge of the creek, which here ran between level banks, and was from twelve to fourteen feet in width.

Straight to the water's edge ran the hounds. The fox had evidently taken to the stream, and the whole pack was in a moment in the water, swimming eagerly for the other side. A minute's huddling. Another minute's restless search. Then old Rosamond owned the scent, and the hounds were off upon her tracks, with their inspiring cry.

The hunters—of whom scarcely a dozen now remained in sight—headed straight for the wide, deep stream. Several of them, however, drew up on approaching it, and rode off to the right and left in search of an easier passage.

"Shall we back down for a few feet of running water?" asked Pierce, pointing forward with his whip.

"Never!" rejoined Will, giving his horse the spur, and driving at a rattling pace for the stream.

But Clara was now foremost. Her blooded horse, with dilated nostrils, had broken into a short, quick rush, risen with an arrowy leap, and made a clean breach across the stream, landing, with several feet clear, on the other bank. Following her Will and Mabel dashed forward side by side. They rose in the air together, a moment they hung suspended over the stream, and then landed, his heavy horse dashing the earth with his heels back into the water, while Mabel's light chestnut cleared the opposite bank.

Pierce had not such good fortune. Heavily-built as his horse was, he was beginning to feel the weight of his rider. He did not balk, but he landed with only his forefeet on the soil, his hind feet striking the water. But his skillful rider was ready for the emergency. Quick as a flash he was off over the horse's ears, and was tugging at the bridle to aid him in his struggling efforts.

This change in weight proved effectual. The animal gained the bank, and Pierce was in an instant more again in the saddle.

The chase had now continued at top speed, for a full hour, and fox, hounds and horses were alike growing tired. Reynard showed a disposition to exchange cunning for speed. Several of his well-known devices to destroy the scent were tried. At one point he had run for a hundred yards on the top of a fence, giving the huntsmen much trouble to regain the scent. At another, he had waded some distance down a shallow brook. But all these devices proved ineffectual, and the hounds were yet in full cry.

Finally the worn-out animal dashed in among

the outbuildings of a farm-house, seeking some hiding-place from his foes.

Instantly there was a general uproar, the screaming of chickens, the cackling of geese, the cries of men and women, the confusion worse confounded by a couple of young colts, who took that opportunity to kick up their heels about the barnyard.

Reynard, evidently not relishing all this uproar, took to the field again, stealing along a hedgerow that led outward from the stable.

On went the chase at full speed, the horsemen now closing up more with the hounds, sure that the run could not last many minutes longer. To their left rode the stranger, while the most of the hunters inclined to the right, nearer the hedge.

Suddenly the line of hounds turned outward, and in a minute more their leader, old Rosamond, leaped on a skulking form that was creeping across the field a short distance in advance.

The strange rider, who was foremost in the chase on that side, sprung from his horse, with the "whoop! whoop!" that announces the death of the fox. In an instant more he had lashed the struggling pack from their prey, and was holding up the dead form of poor Reynard who had given them such lively sport.

Cutting off the head, feet and tail he flung the carcass back to the hounds, who in an instant were tearing it into fragments, rolling over each other in their eagerness.

Looking around the line of excited sportsmen for a minute, the stranger walked up to Clara, who sat her panting horse in the front rank, and presented her the "brush," with a low, deferential bow.

"And to this fair lady the head, if she will accept it."

With a smile of pleasure Mabel took the proffered prize, thanking him for the compliment.

The "pads," or feet, he distributed among those of the remaining hunters who wanted them as trophies of the chase. He then remounted his horse and took his bridle in hand, turning the animal's head toward the neighboring road.

"You are not going?" asked the master of the hunt, with some surprise.

"Yes. Pray excuse me."

"But will you not attend the supper at the Rose Tree? Such a daring rider as you should not run off from the honors you have won."

"I should be glad to; but business will not permit it."

"At all events, you will be kind enough to leave me your name?"

"Not now. You shall have it soon. I have reasons for remaining unknown at present."

With a low bow, and an aspect of dignity which Will had not seen in his face at their previous meetings, he turned his horse to the road, and was off at an easy canter, leaving the throng of hunters lost in surprise.

CHAPTER X.

A NEW GAME FOR A FORTUNE.

BROOKDALE, the manor-house of the Wetherly estate, was a sturdy stone mansion, of Revolutionary date, though it had received many modern improvements. Its windows looked down upon neatly-decorated grounds, while a broad lawn with a stately elm in its center, lay between the front of the house and the high-road that passed close by.

In the smoking-room of this mansion sat two men, on the evening of the day in which the fox-chase had taken place. On the table before them was a decanter of stronger beverage than any wine, flanked by a tray of cigars, and a brace of glasses filled with the ruby-colored liquor.

With the two occupants of the room we are already acquainted. One was Robert Wetherly, the rascally agent whom his namesake had left in charge of this estate. The other was the leader of the gang of ruffians who had waylaid Will Wildfire on the night of the storm.

"The hound has a charmed life," exclaimed Wetherly, with a fierce blow of his fist on the table. "I drew a bead on him twice to-day, but both times he escaped me. Once the woman sheltered him. The second time I was nearly ridden down by—who would you fancy?"

"How the blazes should I know?" answered the other, as he took a draught of the strong liquor.

"No less than that infernal scarred stranger who played the devil with my wedding. I'd give something clever, Dick, to know who that chap is and what he is after. There's something confoundedly mysterious about him."

"What was it he whispered in your ear that night?" asked Dick. "There are all sorts of rumors afloat."

"Nothing, nothing that matters," was the hasty reply, though the speaker grew slightly pale. "He knows something that I would give a cool thousand to find out, that's all."

"And why the thunder then are you wasting your time with an open-handed fellow like this Will Wildfire? If I play rough it is with men who don't show their hands. A man that wears his sign-post on his face will never hurt anybody, for you always know where to meet him."

"I hate him!" hissed Wetherly. "And what is more I fear him. I am under a challenge now to fight him, and I know he will wing me, or shatter me if I back down. I have put off the meeting, but I do not see my way clear out of it. If I hadn't been so infernally unlucky this morning!" He took a sip of the brandy, with a look of deep reflection.

"Good heavens! you're no slouch with the pistol yourself. Blow me if I'd back down from a boy."

"A boy, the devil! Just you keep clear of such boys, if you want to have an easy life. Besides, that's not all. Hang him for a meddler, do you know that he cut me neatly out from a fortune, in spoiling that marriage?"

"Don't ask me. I never guessed a riddle in my life," answered Dick, coolly lighting a cigar. "It struck me that he saved you from being bit."

"It was a clean sell, I tell you. A regular fox-trap; and I stepped right into it like a blind nunny. I might have known that the thing was too confounded unlikely."

"I am all at sea," replied Dick, puffing away at his cigar.

"Why, confound your stupidity, don't you understand that the story was made out of the whole cloth? I have telegraphed to England and found out the truth. There is no Mary Darling. She has been dead nigh these twenty years. Lucy Darling is the true heir of the Lindens. The whole business, that paper and all, were cooked up to cheat me; and I fell headforemost into the sell like a blind mole into a trap."

Dick made no answer. He simply leaned back in his chair, inserted his thumbs into his vest pockets, and gave vent to a long, low whistle, as he fixed his eyes on Wetherly's disturbed countenance.

"Do you wonder, then, that I have a crow to pick with this hound?"

Dick continued to smoke in silence for several minutes, his eyes fixed reflectively on the face of his companion.

"See here," he at length said. "What have you done with that telegram?"

"Burnt it."

"Do you think little Lucy knows of this game?"

"Not she. She swallows it as blindly as I did. She left the Lindens yesterday, and is now staying with her aunt in Dover."

"Then blame you for a blind gull, why don't you go for her again? You have as pretty a figure and as glib a tongue as ever. Swear that you were taken all aback that night, and fancied that she had given you the mitten by her silence. Vow that you love her for herself, and not for her money. Make her believe that you are a sugary lump of disinterestedness and pure affection. Why bless us, man, if you play your cards right, she will drop into your mouth like a ripe peach into a basket. You've got just the prettiest game that a man ever saw, at your fingers' ends; and to set here grumbling as if you'd been sold for a sixpence! Pshaw! I am ashamed of you!"

He poured out a brimming draught of the strong brandy, and tossed it off at a mouthful.

"Good for you, Dick!" exclaimed Wetherly, with quick enthusiasm. "Your head's clear as a bell. I'll do it; and win her too. You may bet on that. And I'll make it worth your while; hang me if I don't."

"Then strike while the iron's hot," Dick quietly rejoined. "She may have written to England. Get your work in within a month, or you may lose the game yet."

"You're right," cried Wetherly, springing to his feet. "You can bet I will not let it grow cold, if I have to get my first blow in before the day is over. But what is to be done about that duel, Dick? He is crowding me like thunder."

"Oh! that's all right. Go ahead with it. Trust me to have the authorities on hand. It wouldn't be a bad joke to let him put a bullet through your arm or your leg, and have him

locked up till the fun is all over. Little Lucy would be sure to fall into the trap then, if you could get her to mix pity with love."

"Bullets be blazed!" growled Wetherly. "The confounded idiot talks about bullets as if he was chattering about sugar-plums. And that heady young devil would be as apt to put one through my head as my arm. You must break in, Dick, before a shot passes, or I'll fly the bargain."

"All right," replied Dick coolly. "It's all one to me. Only I'll be hanged if I'd fly from an even chance."

In ten minutes more Robert Wetherly was off on his projected visit to Lucy Darling, leaving Dick to finish in solitary state his brandy and cigars.

At an hour shortly after that in which this conversation had taken place, a party of the fox-hunters who had taken part in the day's sport, stopped at the Golden Lion on their way home from the late dinner at the Rose Tree.

Among them was Roger Coverly, the master of the hunt, and several of the most ardent sportsmen. They were a little the worse for the potations they had taken on the strength of their morning's sport, and talked away with very loose tongues as they leaned back against the bar at Solomon Tim's hostelry.

"A tight run to-day, gentlemen," remarked Solomon, as he deliberately prepared the drinks ordered by his customers.

"Tight! You better believe it," answered Roger, a little thick in his speech. "Never saw a fox make better sport."

"And I'm told that a stranger to these parts rid in and stole away the brush."

"Yes, hang him!" ejaculated a second. "And rode off as mysterious as if he was King George, or some other high fyer. Wouldn't touch salt with us or give his name. A blamed queer sort of chap, dressed like a tramp, and with a scar on his face as if'd he got a sabre-cut."

At these words a quick glance passed between Solomon and his three cronies, who were all present.

"A scar, did you say, sir?" queried a person who had just entered. "Was it a long, livid cut, from the eye down to the chin?"

"Here's somebody who knows him, at all events," exclaimed Mr. Coverly, quickly turning, "for you have given us his photograph in half a dozen words. Who is he, sir? I'm curious to know."

The new-comer was Robert Wetherly.

"I have seen him, that is all," he replied indifferently. "He is a stranger to me."

"I dunno what ye gentlemen wants to know a chap like that fer," came in a grumbling tone from Bill Blaker, who sat behind his long pipe near the hearth. "You won't know nothing to brag of arter ye take him in."

"Ah! here's another that knows something," cried Mr. Coverly, with a slight hicough.

"I didn't say that," rejoined Bill. "Only I happened in at the death of the fox, and I was a bit dumfounded to see ye gentlemen in sich company, that's all."

"Hold yer tongue, Bill," growled old Sol.

"Who asked you to put yer lip in?"

"Let him talk," said Wetherly, with ill-repressed eagerness. "You know something of this man, then, that is not to his advantage?"

"I know he's a State Prison bird," replied Bill, with great dignity.

The glasses they had raised were set down with a clash on the bar.

"The devil you say!" ejaculated Mr. Coverly.

"He isn't company for gentlemen, that's all I've got to say," remarked Bill, drawing away at his pipe.

"But what do you mean? Where was he in prison and what for?"

"A wink's is good as a nod to a blind hoss," rejoined Bill, mysteriously. "I ain't got nothing ag'in' the chap, and don't want to hurt him. Only I thought I'd put him in his place. What I knows I knows, and if ye want to find any more ye can go further. That ain't no use follo'ing a feller up cause he's happened to meet with a misfortune."

And Bill resolutely held his peace, after doing the man for whom he felt such sympathy about all the harm he conveniently could.

Finding that there was no use to question him further the guests left the room, with significant looks at each other. Robert Wetherly, who was acquainted with some of them, followed them out, an expression upon his face which indicated that he did not intend to let this interesting information stop at that unsatisfactory point.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MEETING ON THE EARNCLIFFE MEADOWS.

"WHAT you call 'em, Marse Will?" queried Pete, the little ebony mortal who acted as *valet de chambre* to Will Wildfire.

"Pistols. What do you think, stupid?" "Golly, don't I know they's pistols? But they isn't volvers, sich as folks shoots with now-a-days. Don't like 'em," and Pete closed his lips with a show of invincible determination.

Will laughed, as he continued to clean the long-bared weapons. A look of mystery came into Pete's face, as he stooped, with his lips close to his master's ear, and whispered in lugubrious tones:

"Folks says as how you's gwine to fight a jule, Marse Will. An' dat's what dem pistols is fur. Can't fool dis nig; I knows it."

"Fight a duel, Pete? What put such nonsense into your pate?"

"It's eberybody's talk. An' eberybody's talk mus be de trufe. Jess you skip dat, Marse Will. Jess don't you do't. Like to know what good you 'spect to git out of bein' bored wid bullets?"

"A man can't die but once, Pete. I don't know that I need care much what becomes of me."

"But what's to come o' me; dat's de question?" Pete earnestly replied. "It's easy 'nuff fur white folks like you to git 'long, anyhow. But what's to 'come of yer little nig? Can't do widout you, no-how. You's jess gwine to leab me a poor orphan."

There were tears in Pete's eyes as he spoke. He had a real warm affection for his master, despite his odd way of showing it. Will laughed as he tore off a piece of white paper about the size of a silver dollar.

"Pin that up against the oak tree there," he said, handing it to Pete.

The boy advanced wondering to the tree in question, a huge-trunked specimen, about twenty paces distant, and pinned the scrap of paper to the bark. Will had meanwhile been engaged in loading the pistol.

"Now stand aside, boy," he commanded, as he lifted the weapon and took quick aim.

A flash, a sharp report, and he lowered his arm. The paper fluttered away.

"See if your pin isn't driven into the tree, Pete."

"Golly, I am dat," cried Pete, with eyes as large as saucers, "and a bullet hole squar' froo de paper."

"Don't you think then, boy, that if I were to fight a duel it would be the other fellow who would stand the chance of being bored?"

"Dat's all berry nice," rejoined Pete, with a doubtful shake of the head. "But den, dat piece o' paper ain't de oder feller. Wouldn't be a bit skeery 'bout shootin' at a bit o' paper myself. But if dar was anoder chap wid a pistol, 'stead of a paper, I's kinder feared ob de consequences."

Will laughed again, as he wiped the silver-mounted weapon.

"I am never afraid of consequences, Pete. If I don't quite kill the other fellow, it will not be because I can't, but because I don't want to."

"And perhaps because killing, even in a duel, is called murder by our unreasonable courts."

Will glanced quickly around on hearing these words, given in a sarcastic tone.

There, leaning against the oak, was the figure of the scarred stranger. But his expression was very different from that which Will had first observed in him. There was a dignity, and self-control about him in strange contrast with his former aspect.

"Is it not rather unusual, Mr. Wildfire," he coolly asked, "to have it bruited through the whole neighborhood that you have given a challenge to a duel?"

"I did not bruit it," Will angrily replied.

"Then it must have been your adversary; for it is the common talk. I came to ask you to think better of this challenge. A duel is no longer the honorable affair it once was; and the contestants run the risk, one of being shot, and the other of being hung."

"He is a despicable cur," cried Will. "I may have been hasty in challenging him; but I will never go back on my word. Lucy Darling shall be revenged for the affront put upon her."

"I am not quite sure that she needs it," the stranger mysteriously replied.

"Why? What do you mean? I do not understand you."

"Only that the interrupted wedding bids fair to come off again."

"The deuce it does!"

"Wetherly is paying court in that quarter again; Lucy is listening to him; and they have become a brace of turtle-doves once more."

"Why, hang it, I fancied he was after her for her money only. He can't love her!"

The stranger advanced a step, and rested his weight up on a railing.

"Send the boy away," he demanded.

Will turned to Pete, who was listening to the conversation with eyes and mouth both wide open.

"Vamoose," he said.

The boy was enough of a Spanish scholar to know what this meant, and he reluctantly withdrew, cut short at the most interesting part of the conversation.

"It is her money he wants," continued the stranger. "Lucy Darling is heir to the Lindens."

"And the paper you read at the wedding?"

"Was a fraud, intended to open the eyes of the bride, and break her from her infatuation. Somehow Wetherly has discovered our trick, while the young lady has not. He is playing the disinterested and she believes in him. The game is getting exciting."

"Why not inform her?"

"No. I cannot go back on my work in that way. I believe she has written to England herself. But

he is pushing matters so fast that there is danger of a wedding before an answer."

"Leave that to me," exclaimed Will, with energy. "You oppose the duel. Why the duel is the very thing. I will not quite kill the fellow. But if he has the heart to stand up before me I think I will put off his wedding for a whole month to come."

"A good idea," laughed the stranger. "But take my word for it, he does not intend to let you shoot at him."

"If he gives me a chance I will discount his intention," Will grimly replied. "But will you excuse me, sir, for inquiring your name, and the cause of your interest in this business?"

"Not now," was the constrained reply. "I have an affair of my own to settle first. When that is done I may surprise more than you. Good-day sir."

He turned and walked away, leaving Will lost in wonder, but too proud to question further after this refusal.

On the morning after this conversation, on the Bonnell meadows, a broad green expanse partly surrounded by woods, and removed from the main road, a group of persons had gathered.

Of these Will Wildfire and his friend Pierce Browning, in company with a doctor whom they had brought with them, stood under the shade of the spreading chestnut, to the east of the field. Opposite them were two persons who had just arrived, Robert Wetherly and his well-dressed but villainous associate, the leader of the ambushed gang.

Will had brought the case of pistols which he had been examining on the previous evening. The others did not seem provided, and Pierce addressed the second of the other side, offering him the use of one of Mr. Wildfire's weapons.

"Much obliged," was the reply. "But my friend is provided. He is used to shooting with the revolver, and prefers that to your single-barreled pistols."

"Just as you please," replied Pierce, indifferently. "You may fight with a blunderbuss if you prefer. We want to be accommodating. But, Mr. Brown—did I not understand that your name was Brown?"

"Yes, Richard Brown, at your service."

"Then, hadn't we best push this affair through? My principal is engaged for a ride at ten, and for a dinner party at one; and you see he has little time to spare."

The other second stared, and then whistled. This was certainly a cool way of looking at it.

"Suppose we make it a ride in an ambulance?" he suggested.

"And a dinner on bed-room grub?"

"We do not accept such suppositions," returned Pierce. "He will take that ride; and you may have my word for that, Mr. Brown. And now, sir, where shall we place our men?"

They conversed earnestly for several minutes, walking about and viewing the field. Then Pierce returned to his principal.

"Well, what's to be done?" asked Will impatiently.

"Our friends are a little skittish, and are trying to make time," rejoined Pierce. "There is something in the wind. Just what it is I don't see, but it won't work. They have got to fight on the nail, or sink out."

"Right," declared Will. "By the nervous way Mr. Wetherly looks toward the woods I fancy they build on an irruption of the authorities. Drive them, Pierce, or force them to back down, like curs as they are."

Pierce returned and the conference was resumed. "The shorter the distance the better," he remarked. "But if you insist on the twenty paces, we are agreeable. Will you step th' in off?"

"Not that way," he continued. "Here, to north and south. We don't want either of our men to fight with the sun in his face."

"And bless my eyes!" he continued; "a pace isn't a yard and a quarter in my dictionary. Don't put the men out of sight of each other. They are not intending to peg away at a barn door, or at an acre field."

"That's my idea of a pace," Dick coolly responded, as he continued to make his longest strides.

"How are you on a long shot?" Pierce asked his principal, on returning to him. "That confounded chap has made a long twenty yards of the distance. Some game in this."

"All right; I'll discount their game," Will rejoined. "If he gives me the chance for a shot I promise that he shall not be in marrying trim for the next two months."

Wetherly was glancing anxiously toward the wood when his second approached.

"I do not see your friends," he anxiously remarked.

"They are all ready," Dick responded. "You will find them prepared to pounce out as soon as I give them the signal. But why the deuce don't you try a shot at the fellow anyhow? If I were before him, with a revolver in my hand, shoot me if I wouldn't give him the six barrels."

"He has such blazing luck in everything he undertakes," muttered Wetherly. "And they say he is a dead shot with every weapon. I want time to make a will in your favor, Dick, before I step out."

Dick laughed. "Have it your own way," he said. "Excuse me; there's six foot six beckoning me. I must see what he wants."

Another short conference took place between the two seconds.

"I am to give the word," answered Pierce, on returning to his principal. "One, two, three, and fire. Don't let him get his bullet in ahead of you. Drop him a nap shot at the word fire. And mind you, Will; hang me if I don't give the word, police or no,

if they leave us a minute's grace. Are you ready, gentlemen?" he called out.

"Ready, sir."

"Then let us finish with this little amusement, before our dinners get cold. Station your man, sir."

Will advanced with a firm step to the position assigned him. His keen eye took a quick survey of the surrounding scene, the broad meadow, the neighboring wood, with its screening fringe of bushes, the curving blue skies overhead. His vision rested a moment on this charming landscape, as if he felt that he might never look upon it again. Then his eyes turned upon the figure of his antagonist, who had just taken his position, and upon whose face he marked a slight shade of pallor, telling that all was not at rest within him.

Will's lip curled in scorn, and he grasped his pistol with a firm gripe, standing erect and steady as a young oak. Pierce looked at him, and then at his antagonist, and a slight shadow of uneasiness which had displayed itself upon his countenance passed off, before a smile of assurance.

"Are you ready, gentlemen?"

"Ready," returned Dick, loudly.

As if this word had been a signal there instantly emerged from the wood the forms of three men, who seemed to have been concealed behind the bushes. They ran quickly across the field toward the combatants.

"Aha! is that the game?" cried Pierce angrily. "Hang me if we won't have a shot anyhow! Ready, gentlemen. You know the word. One—two—three—"

"Hold!" came in loud, stern accents from the approaching men.

"Fire!" yelled Pierce.

Will quickly raised his pistol, but his antagonist remained with his hand at his side, evidently with no intention to fire. A moment's hesitation, then Will took a quick aim and pulled the trigger.

Wetherly turned half round, and the pistol flew from his nerveless hand.

"You have hit him!" exclaimed Pierce anxiously.

"No. I could not shoot the cur with his pistol hand at his side. You will find my bullet mark on his pistol. I may have made his finger tingle; but that is all—What do you wish, gentlemen?" This was addressed to the three men who had just come up.

"To put a stop to this law-breaking business," sternly replied the foremost. "And to arrest the participants."

"For what?" replied Will coolly. "There is surely no crime in a little exercise of skill? This gentleman and I were merely trying who could shoot a pistol out of the other's fingers without touching him. I have succeeded, as you will find on examining his weapon. Come, Mr. Browning; our sport is over for to-day."

"That subterfuge will not answer, sir," the officer sternly replied.

"Subterfuge?" cried Will, fiercely turning to him. "Will you be kind enough to withdraw that word, sir? Or would you prefer to take a hand in our little sport?"

"No, no," rejoined the officer, with a grim laugh. "And if you don't like the word you may replace it with any you prefer. But, gentlemen, I have been informed that a duel is intended here; and it is my duty to bind you over to keep the peace."

"Informed?" exclaimed Pierce, with a look of scorn at Wetherly and his second. "I fancied it would end that way. This comes of dealing with cowards. All right, gentlemen. Mr. Wildfire is ready to pledge himself not to shoot at this fellow again—except if he is in self-defense. You will allow him that privilege?"

"The law does not permit the carrying of deadly weapons," answered the officer.

"But the mayor may grant the right, when a man is in danger of assassination. Lead on, gentlemen. We will promise only to defend ourselves against murderers."

His eyes were fixed on Wetherly and Dick so significantly, that the latter stepped angrily forward.

"Do you apply that word to me?"

"Why, if the shoe fits," Pierce indifferently responded.

"Hang me, then, for a white-livered—"

"Excuse me," interrupted a new voice. "Mr. Richard Brown, I believe?"

"And suppose that is my name, what then?"

"Only that I have a moment's business with you." Will started on observing that the speaker was the stranger with the scarred cheek.

"This young man does not quite relish the name of assassin," he continued, turning to the officers, "yet I have here a warrant which I will ask one of you to execute, charging him with an attempt to murder Mr. William Wildfire on the night of the fifteenth of January. Of course we do not condemn him as a murderer; and he can have the chance of proving before the courts that he is none."

"Hell's fire!" cried Dick, in fury, making a movement toward Wetherly's revolver.

"Not just yet, my friend," replied the officer, laying a heavy hand on his shoulder. "I arrest you upon the serious charge contained in this warrant."

CHAPTER XII.

ANOTHER INTERRUPTED WEDDING.

In an easy-chair, within the pleasant sitting-room of her aunt's residence, sat Lucy Darling, her slender fingers busily engaged in some of that incomprehensible fancy-work with which young ladies manage to consume their spare time.

She was thinner and paler than when we saw her last, on the evening of the interrupted wedding, but there was the same soft light in her eyes, and the

same fresh bloom on her lips. She was recovering from the shock of that distressing occasion.

"All alone? And crocheting, as I live! And looking like anything but a ghost."

Lucy turned quickly toward the speaker. She dropped her work on seeing the laughing face of Clara Moreland, who had just entered the room.

"Oh! I was so anxious to see you!" cried Lucy, springing quickly to her feet. "How was it, then? Was there a duel?"

"Not exactly," answered Clara, with curling lip.

"I was so afraid that one of them would be killed! But tell me all about it, dear. They did not fight, then?"

"I am very glad they didn't," replied Clara. "I would never have forgiven Will, if he had taken part in such a barbarous business. 'But—' and her scornful look returned.

"But what?" anxiously.

"But I would rather have had him fight than show the white feather of a coward. The authorities were informed, but not by Will; you may be sure of that."

"By whom then? By Robert Wetherly?"

"Yes," Clara contemptuously replied. "He had officers stationed in the woods. His second gave them a signal, and they came out just as the duel was ready to be fought."

"I don't believe it!" cried Lucy bitterly. "Robert Wetherly could not be such a coward!"

"I had it from one of the officers himself," replied Clara.

Lucy fell back in her chair, her face blazing with anger and scorn. Mild and gentle as she was she could not bear the thought of having a coward for a lover.

Her lips were dry, and a strange look in her eyes, when she again lifted her head.

"I do not know what I have done to deserve such unhappiness," she murmured. "Here are you, whose life has passed like a happy dream. In a few days more you will be married to him whom you love, and who loves you; while poor me—"

"None are sure of happiness while they live," Clara replied, with a very grave look. "I do not know what it is, Lucy, but a very dark presentiment comes over me like a thunder-cloud. Something terrible is going to happen, I am sure. I would give anything if that wedding was once over. I feel that a deeper trouble than yours is impending over me."

Lucy tried to laugh off this gloomy foreboding of her friend, but failed to do so. Whatever its cause, it had taken too deep hold of her to be readily dispossessed.

An hour passed. Then Clara rose to leave.

"Do you like it here, Lucy?"

"Yes. Better than at the Lindens. In fact, I could not well content myself there under present circumstances."

"Did it ever strike you, dear, what a very strange story it was, with which that unknown person broke off your wedding?"

"Why, Clara—"

"I don't half believe it, that's flat. What proof have you of it? Any person might have prepared that paper."

"Why, what an idea! At any rate, I have written to England."

"Then don't get married until you have an answer."

"And why not, pray?"

"Does it not seem strange that Mr. Wetherly, after deserting you somewhat basely on the night of your wedding, has come back again in the role of a penitent lover?"

"Any one may repent," replied Lucy, a little coldly.

Clara stooped, and whispered in her ear.

"It is not repentance, child. I verily believe he has discovered that you are still the heir of the Lindens, and is trying to deceive you with the old game of the disinterested lover."

When Lucy looked up again her friend was gone; but she had left the sting of suspicious thoughts behind her.

An hour afterward the unhappy young girl was still sitting by the window, her head upon her hand, lost in her gloomy thoughts, while her neglected work lay untouched upon the floor at her feet.

A step, unheard by her, sounded behind her. An arm was thrown around her waist, and a kiss pressed upon her cheek. With a cry of alarm she quickly sprang up, and stood like a deer at bay, gazing with indignation and wide-open eyes upon the intruder.

"Why, love, one would think that a bee had stung you," laughed Robert Wetherly.

"How can you?" she demanded, in illy-repressed indignation. "I do not like to be startled that way, Mr. Wetherly."

"Why she is really angry," he laughed. "Well, I vow I had no idea of bringing such a color into your cheek and such a flash into your eye. Come, sit down here, Lucy, I want to talk with you."

"I do not feel like sitting down," she coldly replied.

"Very well then," with a shrug, "we will stand up until you get over the effect of that stolen kiss. I will admit it was very improper; but, then, if you will look so dreamy and so tempting!"

"And so, Robert Wetherly, you have been engaging in a duel?"

"Who told you that?" quickly.

"The newspapers perhaps. It is no close secret. But who was it, that, after taking part in such a barbarous affair, was coward enough to himself inform the police? Cunning enough to sham, but not brave enough to fight?"

"Has anybody dared say I did so?" His face was red with anger.

"Yes," in a tone of scorn.

"Then he or she lies, whoever they are? I do not approve of dueling, any more than you do, Lucy. I was forced into this, and had to fight to save my honor. I promise you that I shall never enter into another such affair. But let it go. What I want to talk about to day, love, is a matter nearer to both our hearts. I have sought to prove to you that I love you for yourself, not for interested motives. It was for this that I returned to you after the loss of your fortune. It is for this that I now wish to hasten the happy day of our wedding. There is no need for delay. We are both prepared. You mistrusted me, I know. I am eager to prove my disinterestedness."

He sought to take her hand. But she withdrew it, the brooding look still upon her face.

"Not yet, Mr. Wetherly," she quietly replied. "I am not ready yet. I request one month's delay."

"Why should we delay?" he eagerly demanded, though with a shadow of uneasiness in his voice. "This is foolish and ridiculous, Lucy."

"Perhaps so. I suppose I have the right to be ridiculous occasionally."

"But you are in such a strange mood to-day. Why do you demand this delay?"

She lifted her head, and fixed her eyes meaningly upon him.

"Because I wish first to hear from England. It is possible that there may be a mistake in this story of my sister's survival. I do not wish to marry under false pretenses; coming to you as a beggar, when I may be really an heiress. I wish to know where I stand before I take any new step in life."

There was something strangely sarcastic in her tone.

"But, Lucy," he angrily exclaimed. "Do you not see that I wish to hurry the wedding for that very reason, that I may prove my disinterestedness?"

"And cheat me perhaps," fixing her steady eye upon him. "Have you got the start of me, and learned already that I am really an heiress and that this tale is false?"

The oath was both strong and deep that broke from Robert Wetherly's lips when he found himself again in the open air, and out of hearing of the strangely self-possessed girl whom he had thought to so easily deceive.

"It is Will Wildfire that I have to thank for this!" he ejaculated. "Blast him for a meddling hound, he has spoiled all my plans! He broke off my wedding when the girl was mine in a word more; and now he has destroyed my other well-laid plan. But let him beware!" and a bitter hiss was in his tone. "His own wedding comes off in three days. We will see if all goes merry as a marriage bell on that festive occasion."

There was a very dark look upon his face, as he walked on muttering to himself.

"This scarred stranger! Is that another of Will Wildfire's schemes? I have not yet forgotten his whisper in my ear. 'The chain is broken. The bloodhound is loose. Beware!' To what did he refer? Was it to my worthy cousin, the true owner of Brookdale? Had I not better have taken the warning and left for parts unknown, before the true Robert Wetherly came to seek his own? It may not be safe to have to account for my stewardship."

It would have been a happy day for more than him, if he had been guided by his fears, and taken flight, then and there, from the scene of his dark thoughts and deeds.

Three days after the date of the scene just recorded there was a happy party gathered in an apartment of the delightful country mansion in which Clara Moreland resided. The day had been a glorious one. The snows and ice of winter had gone. The mild weather of late February so tempered the chill breath of the winter king that the grass was green in the fields, and some early flowers had already opened their daring buds. Although it was now early evening the windows of the room in which this party had gathered were raised, though the shutters were partly closed.

It was the second wedding to which we have come in the course of our story, that of Will Wildfire and Clara Moreland. As they stood together before the old clergyman, the same who had officiated upon the former occasion, Will's handsome face was radiant with joy, and he looked upon his beautiful bride with all the beaming happiness of an ardent young soul.

This joy was not reflected in her face. Despite her efforts a shadow lurked upon her features; she could not throw off the dark presentiment that troubled her.

Pierce Browning, whose shapely but huge figure stood at Will's right, did not fail to notice this strange expression of the bride, and he whispered for a moment with Lucy Darling, who acted as first bridesmaid. She nodded and whispered to Clara, upon whose face came a forced smile.

"What it is, Lucy, I do not know," she whispered. "But it clings to me like a ghost."

The marriage service proceeded. A thrill of involuntary expectation came upon those who had been present at Lucy Darling's broken wedding, when the aged clergyman repeated the words which had caused such a strange interruption on that occasion.

"If there is any one who knows just cause why this man should not take this woman to wife, let him now speak, or forever hold his peace."

He paused. A deep silence fell upon the room. They could not help being affected by the result of this demand on the former occasion. Yet none knew why such a strange feeling was upon them, and were all startled on hearing a voice, that seemed to come from beyond the room.

"I know just cause!"

"What is your cause?" queried the astounded clergyman.

"This." Simultaneously there came the sharp report of a pistol, accompanied by the sound of crashing glass, and a loud cry of dread and pain.

The eyes of the bride had turned toward one of the partly-closed windows, through which the gas-light gave her a momentary glimpse of a face, dark with threat and passion. Hastily she flung her arms protectively about the form of her lover, and the bullet intended for him pierced her frame.

The cry she gave was followed by a gasping sound, as she sunk bleeding to the floor, her form caught in the strong arms of Pierce Browning.

"Take her, Will," he exclaimed, turning to the thunderstruck groom.

"After a doctor, like lightning!" he shouted to the frightened and shuddering group.

Then he turned, and with one leap at the window broke through sash, glass and shutter as though they were but paper, and in a moment had disappeared in the gathering darkness in furious pursuit of the murderer.

The fright and confusion in the room were indescribable. One was found with sufficient self-possession to fly for a doctor, but the remainder ran backward and forward in utter wildness. Will bore the bleeding bride to a couch, and hung over her with an utter loss of his strong fortitude, his whole nature broken down by the dreadful disaster.

She was fortunately insensible. The ball had struck her back of the temple and entered the brain. The doctor shook his head gravely after a momentary look at the wound.

"Is it death?" asked Will, pitifully.

"I fear so."

The strong man buried his face in his hands, lost in a paroxysm of grief.

Meanwhile Pierce returned. His pursuit had been in vain. The murderer had escaped.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE ANSWER TO THE RIDDLE.

CLARA MORELAND lay for the whole night in utter insensibility. Deep grief and the dark thirst for revenge surrounded her. What murderous hand had sent that death-dealing bullet? Suspicion pointed to Robert Wetherly, or to some of his villainous associates; but suspicion was not proof, and Will Wildfire was so overwhelmed and stupefied with grief that he had lost all his ordinary resolution.

Pierce Browning was more active, and had roused the whole country around in search of the escaping murderer, but in vain. No lurking or suspicious character could be found.

It was ten o'clock on the morning of the next day ere Clara gave signs of returning animation. The doctor had succeeded in extracting the bullet during her swoon, but it had entered so deeply that he despaired of a favorable result.

A soft sigh. A slight movement of the hands. Then the veiled eyes opened. A sign from the doctor's hand kept back the excited friends and the inconsolable lover.

"Where am I? What has happened? I feel so weak," she faintly murmured. "Ah! I see it now! I see it all! That dreadful face at the window! That pistol shot!" she shuddered, as her hands covered her eyes.

"What face? Whose face?" Will involuntarily exclaimed.

"His! Robert Wetherly's! Oh! Will! my love! my darling! He would have killed you! He would—oh! clasp me in your arms! Kiss me, love! for I am dying. Dying for you!"

Will sprang impulsively forward, flung his arms around the slender form, pressed his lips upon the pallid mouth, while the great tears from his eyes wet her cheeks.

"Yes, I am dying, Will," she softly whispered. "But, I am happy! Oh, so happy!"

She rested a moment in his arms, the breath growing fainter and fainter, though her eyes remained fixed upon his with a look of divine love.

Then a convulsive movement; a straightening out of the form; a fluttering breath; and the head fell nervelessly back upon the pillow.

"Take him from the room," whispered the doctor to Pierce. "Poor child; her earthly troubles are over."

"But not my duty!" cried Will, with sudden energy. "From her dying lips I have learned the name of her murderer! Vengeance remains!"

At an hour somewhat earlier than that of this sad scene a group of men had gathered in the breakfast room at Brookdale. This was a fine old apartment, wainscoted in English oak, and with windows reaching to the floor. As the morning was so warm one of these windows was raised, looking upon a green lawn without, adorned with dense masses of shrubbery.

There were five men in the party, which consisted of Robert Wetherly, three sturdy, stern-faced men, dressed in a sort of uniform costume, and the shambling figure of Bill Blaker, the punch-loving frequenter of the Golden Lion.

"Ah! there is his ring now, gentlemen!" remarked Wetherly. "Will you please retire? This room, please. You remember the signal?"

"Certainly. That is our business," one of the men sharply replied, as they entered the small adjoining room of which he had opened the door.

"Now, my friend, we will play checkmate to you, whatever your game is," exclaimed Wetherly, rubbing his hands with satisfaction. "The bloodhound is loose, eh? Very well; you shall feel his fangs."

At this moment a servant opened the door leading into the hall, and ushered in the scarred stranger,

who has already made so many unexpected appearances in these pages.

But he presented a somewhat different aspect than usual. His face and his disheveled hair remained the same, but his threadbare clothes had given place to new and fashionably-cut attire, while the bend in his shoulders had disappeared. He now stood erect, and with an enigmatical smile upon his lips.

"You received my message, then?"

"Yes; and as I was anxious to know what you wanted with me I hastened to obey your summons."

"It is only a trifling matter of business," remarked Wetherly, with a smile of triumph. "First I wish to know what you meant by your whisper to me on the night of my wedding."

"I fancied you understood me, by the expression of your face on that occasion."

"Who was the bloodhound?"

"There is but one whom you have reason to fear."

"I have reason to fear no one," came the proud answer. "You have chosen me to play your games on. You have been trying the incognito dodge. It will not work. It is my turn now."

"Your turn?" with a look of affected surprise.

"Yes, my turn, Maurice Tapley."

This name seemed to be the preconcerted signal, for it was followed by the opening of the door of the adjoining room, and the entrance of the men placed in ambush there.

"Do you know this man?" Wetherly asked of Bill Blaker.

"Know him? Well I rather calculate so," replied Blaker, with a knowing grin. "Couldn't let out his name, cause in Moyamensing they only knowed him as 74. But he's an old jail-bird, for I've seen him thar myself."

Wetherly looked for a show of consternation in his visitor at this announcement. But he still preserved his enigmatical smile, and asked without a gesture of surprise:

"What were you doing there?"

"Why I only—Well it were a little affair of chickens," stammered Bill. "Why—But I dunno as how that's got anything to do with this business."

"So," said the stranger, turning with dignity to Wetherly. "You have brought a chicken-thief here to confront me? Is that what you invited me here for?"

"It is not because you have been in jail, but because you are wanted there again," Wetherly triumphantly announced. "You have thought fit to meddle in my affairs. I have my own way of repaying those who take such an interest in my business. —Officers, there is your prisoner."

"You are wanted, Maurice Tapley," said one of the men, stepping forward, and laying his hand on the stranger's shoulder.

"On what charge?" calmly.

"On that of taking part in the burglary at Camp's Mills, on the fifth of last January."

"But suppose I deny being Maurice Tapley?"

"That cat won't jump, old chap," replied the officer in a jocular tone. "I have your description here; and you are a little too well marked for your business. You should have chalked out that scar."

Wetherly laughed at this as if he saw in it a brilliant joke.

"I won't do, Tapley. You barked up the wrong tree when you tried your tricks on me."

"Will you allow me a few words, gentlemen?" asked the prisoner, politely, of his captors.

"If you'll promise to cut it short."

"It is only that I have a trifle of business with this gentleman. He has played a very sharp game on me with the Maurice Tapley business, particularly as I never heard the name before. I will be kinder than he and clear up a slight mystery that is troubling him. He is anxious to know what I meant by a certain whisper bidding him beware of the bloodhound."

"Not at all," replied Wetherly, with assumed indifference, though he could not hide a slight uneasiness. "I am not interested in any such matter."

"Well then, perhaps I may make it interesting to you," continued the prisoner, with a sarcastic smile. "I presume, gentlemen, you look upon this person as the proprietor of Brookdale?"

"Why, certainly."

"That happens to be a slight error. He is only here as the agent of the real proprietor. And as he has not proved faithful as a steward, it is about time—"

"Why, you infernal hound!" exclaimed Wetherly, striding forward, his face white with rage. "Do you dare accuse me—"

"There, there, my friend," waving him back with a dignified gesture. "I speak only for the bloodhound, which, as I have told you, is loose."

"And what am I to understand by such a ridiculous riddle as that?"

"I should explain it in this way: The real proprietor of Brookdale, Robert Wetherly, of Geneva, has heard of the manner in which his property is being handled, and to satisfy himself of the matter has crossed the ocean, in order to see for himself the actions of his agent. After keeping a close eye for a month on the operations of that agent he has satisfied himself."

"Of what?" in threatening tones.

"That if he had given him free foot much longer he would not have found much property to look after."

"It is an infernal lie, from beginning to end!" ejaculated the furious villain. "And shoot me if I will stand here longer to be belied by a convicted burglar. In the first place Robert Wetherly is not in this country. If so, where is he?"

"Here!"

This unlocked-for answer came from the lips of the mysterious stranger, on whom all eyes were turned in amazement.

Stepping quickly to the table he dipped his handkerchief into a vessel of water that sat there. In a moment he had drawn the wet handkerchief over his scarred cheek, while at the same time he took off his hat, and with it the straggling hair which stood out on all sides from under his rim.

A most remarkable metamorphosis followed this movement. The scar had entirely disappeared. The unkempt hair was replaced by short, well-combed brown locks. His stubby beard had vanished. There stood before the astonished spectators a handsome, erect, dignified person, with a face resembling that of the agent of Brookdale, though with a totally different expression.

"Here!" he repeated, turning toward his trembling and thunderstruck namesake. "Here is Robert Wetherly, the owner of Brookdale, come to demand of you an account of your stewardship, and to take from you that charge which you have so dishonestly dealt with."

For several minutes the discomfited villain was unable to reply. He stood, gazing with wide-open eyes, as if at an apparition.

"Take it," he at length bitterly ejaculated. "What is left of it. And much good may it do you."

He was retreating precipitately from the room, when his steps were arrested by one of the officers, at a signal from the metamorphosed stranger.

"You will take him into custody on virtue of this warrant," said the master of Brookdale, producing a legal document from his pocket, which he handed to the officer. "Accuse him of fraud, treachery and false pretense."

There was a look of gloom and desperation on the face of the exposed villain, as he stood at the side of the room, near the open window, with the heavy hand of the officer upon his shoulder.

At this instant there took place a sudden change in the situation of affairs. The door of the room was flung violently open, and Will Wildfire rushed in, followed closely by Pierce Browning.

Will's face was distorted with pain and anger. His eyes glared, a light froth was upon his lips.

"Where is he?" he screamed. "The murderer! Ah! I see him now!"

His eyes had just fallen on the shrinking form and pallid face of the exposed villain. With a cry like that of a wild beast Will sprang forward.

It would have gone hard with Robert Wetherly at that instant had not the officers stepped forward to defend their prisoner, while Pierce Browning laid his firm grasp on the arm of his excited friend.

"What is the matter?" demanded the master of Brookdale. "What means this sudden intrusion?"

"It means that this man is the murderer of Clara Moreland," explained Pierce. "She has just died of her wound, after living long enough to denounce him as her murderer."

"And here is the very bullet by which she died!" exclaimed Will. "As I am a living man the same ball shall pierce his dastardly heart!"

Drawing a pistol from his pocket he proceeded, with remarkable steadiness considering his excited state, to charge it, dropping the fatal bullet into the barrel upon the charge of powder.

"Hold!" cried Mr. Wetherly, starting forward. "If he has committed murder the courts must deal with him. Restrain your friend, sir," to Pierce.

"No man shall restrain me," Will fiercely rejoined. "By all the gods, he dies by my hand!"

During these moments the prisoner had been glancing fearfully from right to left, cowering before the indignant face of his foe. Now, with a quick flash of the eye, he suddenly broke from the loosened grasp of his captor, and instantly darted through the open window near which he stood. Before a man could move to prevent him he had disappeared behind the clustering shrubbery.

CHAPTER XIV. THE MURDER CASE.

THE momentary astonishment at this sudden movement was followed by a rapid leap forward of Will Wildfire, who sprang through the open window in pursuit of his mortal foe. He was instantly followed by the others, every face full of anger and intense desire to recapture the escaping murderer.

A second only sufficed to carry Will through the screen of bushes behind which the fugitive had concealed himself. But he was no longer there. He had disappeared.

"Which way did he take?" demanded the breathless pursuer, of a man who stood further back on the grounds.

"He struck for the fence, leaped upon one of your horses, and was off like a flash. Yonder he goes now."

He pointed to an open space, that gave a glimpse of the road a short distance in advance. There appeared the form of Robert Wetherly, riding rapidly away.

Will and Pierce had, in fact ridden up to the house, throwing their bridles over the fence palings, and left their horses standing there while they entered. It was one of these horses which the escaping murderer had taken, while he had been shrewd enough to loosen the other, which was following its companion down the road at a slow gallop.

Will darted after this horse at full speed. It was his own, Wetherly having taken that of Pierce Browning. But the animal had already a considerable start, and Will's heart sunk within him as the chance of his foe's escape grew more decided. Fortunately the leisurely trotting horse soon stopped, attracted by a fresh clump of grass by the roadside.

Will ran with the speed of a deer, and in a minute more was up with the quietly-browsing animal.

A touch of his hand, an agile spring, and in an instant he was in the saddle, and had caught the loose bridle in his strong grasp.

"Now!" he shouted, "it is life or death on your speed, good horse! Fly now, if you never flew before!"

With one glance back toward the others, who had already run to the stables, for horses with which to join the pursuit, Will turned the horse into the road, dashed his spurred heels against its flanks and was off at a tearing gallop in pursuit of his foe.

But the latter had already gained a quarter of a mile start, and on Pierce Browning's strongly-built and fast-going horse was flying onward at a break-neck gait, freely using on the mettled creature a stout switch which he had caught up from the ground.

The road just here was straight and smooth, and Will could plainly see his foe in advance. With set teeth and glaring eyes the young man scarcely breathed in his bitter hope of revenge, as he forced his generous steed to his utmost vigor of motion. And the fugitive was not less eager to escape than was his foe to overtake him. Down the straight road went the thundering race, the horses driven to their utmost stretch of speed, while the fierce glare in the eyes of the pursuer was replaced by a growing horror in those of the fugitive, a cowardly dread of the fate which seemed bearing pitilessly down upon him.

Meanwhile the others had taken to the saddle, helping themselves to some of the numerous horses in the Brookdale stables.

"We have little chance to overtake them," said Mr. Wetherly. "But we can only follow. We may be of some aid."

"That will never do," replied Pierce, with a dissenting shake of the head. "They have too much start. What is more, Will is not going to overtake his foe. The hound has my horse, which has all the speed and twice the bottom of that of Will."

"What shall we do then?"

"This. There are too many twists and turns in that fellow's nature for him to go long on a straight road. He will be trying the tricks of the fox, turning and doubling on his track. I move then that we break for the side roads. Make a straight wake across country to right and left, and we may head him off in some of his shrewd tricks."

The idea was too good to be instantly acted upon. Dividing into two parties, of which Pierce and the principal officer constituted one, and Mr. Wetherly and the two minor officers, the other; they rode off, as he had advised, to right and left, taking the fields as yet, until they should meet some cross road.

The two leaders made little of the fences they met, except some specially high ones; but their companions, unused to this sort of exercise, and mounted on horses not broken to leap, were forced to seek low places, or to dismount and take down bars, ere they could get from one field to another.

They were some time, therefore, in reaching the roads of which they were in search. Along these they rode toward lanes that opened into them from the high road. Another idea of Pierce's was here carried out, to patrol the openings of these lanes, and thus head off the fugitive should he take any of them. Thus the five men became gradually separated, and stationed as guards at the entrances to as many narrow lanes, which crossed the country from the turnpike to the parallel roads on either side of it.

Here, like patient cavalry sentinels, they silently waited, with the understanding that they were to move on to a more advanced locality, if the fugitive failed to appear after allowing sufficient time.

While this ambush was being laid the pursuit went on with undiminished vigor. Wetherly was slowly gaining on his pursuer, whose horse had not the bottom to keep up that tremendous pace. Yet Will spurred him on with the impatient ardor of a madman, his heart burning within him with fear that his foe might escape.

If ever the thirst for blood was justified it was in his case, and a bitter determination to take the life of the murderous wretch before him was the only feeling left in his impassioned brain.

The road, which had so far been straight, now bent at a long angle, the fugitive disappearing from the eyes of his pursuer. Will thundered onward to the turn in the road. But his foe was still lost to sight, no living form appearing on the avenue before him.

Another curve in the road, however, showed itself about a quarter mile in advance. It was a natural conclusion that the fugitive had turned this curve. Will rode onward with unabated ardor.

He passed the mouth of a lane that led westwardly at a sharp angle, scarcely observing it. The next curve was reached. It lay at the summit of a slight hill. Before it the road stretched onward for nearly a mile without a bend. Some moving things were visible in it, wagons, carts, etc., but no trace of the flying foe.

With a sense of astonishment and bitter disappointment his eyes roamed quickly over the surrounding country, which was visible to a considerable distance from his elevated point of view. A flash leaped into his eyes. Here, to the left, pursuing the lane he had thoughtlessly passed, rode the fugitive, looking back upon him with eyes in which Will fancied that, even at that distance, he could see a gleam of triumph.

The entrance to the lane lay an eighth of a mile back. But it crossed the country at an acute angle, and was much nearer across fields than by way of the road. Will needed not a second's consideration.

Breasting his horse at the roadside fence, and lifting him with a skilful hand to the leap, he took him over it like a flash. Both pursuer and pursued were, in fact, riding trained hunters.

Across the hard-bottomed pasture field in front he thundered. It was a little soother on top, however, from the warmth of the February sun, and the horse labored slightly as the soft surface layer yielded to his tread. Will was glad to find a broken panel which let him into the lane without need of a high leap.

Meanwhile the mounted guards were waiting impatiently the appearance of the fugitive. The officer who was stationed below Pierce had just ridden up, saying:

"The time is up at my post, and no entries. I judge I had best ride on to the next cross-road."

"All right," answered Pierce. "He has hardly had time to reach my post yet. Push on then.—But hold! What is that?"

His eyes were turned down the lane, in which some moving object had just become visible through the leafless bushes that thickly bordered its sides. Holding his hands above his eyes so as to shelter them from the glare of the eastward sun, he continued to intently gaze down the narrow road.

"By all that's good it's a horseman coming! Draw back a little. We will wait for him on each side the entrance, and give him a warm reception."

But this plan was not destined to be carried out, for at that moment the fugitive broke into full view in the open lane, catching sight of his waiting to s at the same instant.

There was no mistaking the form of Pierce Browning. The flying villain slackened the speed of his horse, and glanced furtively from side to side, like a fox that has been caught in a trap.

"Come on! We are waiting for you!" shouted Pierce, sarcastically.

But the fox was not to be so easily caught. The roadside fence was low at that point, and in a moment the fugitive had breasted his strong horse against it, and leaped into the adjoining field.

A fierce oath broke from Pierce's lips. He tried his horse at the fence, but it refused the leap. Grinding his teeth he brought the animal up again and again, uselessly.

"Down the road!" cried the officer. "We may head him off or find a lower fence. There is Mr. Wildfire in the field now, in full chase.—Down the road!"

Down the road they went, at a faster gait than the fugitive could make in the yielding surface of the field. Seeing his danger he gradually veered his horse away, at an angle from the road followed by his pursuers. This, however, brought him nearer to Will, who had leaped the fence lower down, and was riding furiously across the broad meadow, at an angle likely to intercept the enemy.

The chase was growing critical. Caught between two fires the scoundrel glanced uneasily about him, the look of dread deepening in his eyes. He was alert enough to perceive that but one chance remained. A short distance in advance rose a high fence, bordered on the opposite side with a thick hedge. The question of life or death lay in that leap. His horse was yet strong and active; that of his pursuer was beginning to show the strain of his fierce pace. They both recognized in an instant where lay the crisis of the chase, and turned their horses simultaneously to the hedge.

Wetherly was still an eighth of a mile in advance, but this distance was rapidly diminishing at the angle of approach of the two riders. He reached the fence scarcely two hundred yards in advance.

The heart of the fugitive sunk as he saw the height and width of the obstacle before him, and noted the drops of froth on the lips of his gallant horse. But he must go over it or die, and he roused the noble animal to its utmost speed, lifting him skilfully as he fronted the dangerous obstacle. The hunter rose with the graceful movement of a bird, shot through the air, breaking the top rail with a blow from his hind leg, and dashed through the hedge, leaving it to close behind him. The next moment he was pushing on over the hard ground of the adjoining field.

With equal fury Will rode at the obstacle; but not with equal success. His blooded horse gallantly rose to the leap, sprang from his tracks, and dashed at the fence. But the poor creature had been driven beyond its strength. Its fore feet struck the fence, flinging it in a summered over into the hedge, and throwing Will from the saddle with stunning fury.

How long he lay there insensible he could not have told. His head had struck on a hard clod with dangerous force, and it was long before he recovered his lost senses. He was aroused at length by the report of a pistol.

Suddenly stirring and opening his eyes, he saw before him a group of people, who were at that instant breaking and starting back in all directions.

"What is the matter?" he asked, in a tone of bewilderment.

Some of the men instantly came to him.

"Your poor devil of a horse broke both its fore legs," one of them announced. "We have had to shoot the poor suffering creature, to put it out of its misery."

"And the murderer? The man I was pursuing?" he demanded, as his memory returned. "Where is he? Is there a horse here? I must be after him again."

"It is of no use. You have been lying here for half an hour. He is far away by this time. But your friends are in pursuit of him. The whole country is being aroused."

Will with difficulty regained his feet. The chase was indeed over for him. He could hardly stand upright. One of the persons present, a passing gentleman, had left his carriage standing in the road.

He supported Will to this vehicle, and took him to his home, the poor fellow's head painfully throbbing at every step he took.

It was near night when Pierce Browning and Mr. Wetherly returned. Their pursuit had been unsuccessful. The fugitive had regained the turnpike, reached a neighboring railway station, and was now driving westward toward Harrisburg at the full speed of an express train.

"But the telegraph! He may be caught yet!" Messages have been flashed in all directions," replied Pierce. "The police are everywhere warned. He cannot escape us."

Yet he did. How or when he left the train no one could tell, but all efforts to arrest him proved in vain. He utterly disappeared.

Days passed. The funeral of Clara Moreland took place, attended by a long train of earnest mourners. Among them Will Wildfire walked with dry eyes and lowering face. He had thoughts too deep for outer grief.

Yet two days afterward Pierce Browning found him sitting by the side of her grave, his face wet with the tears he had shed, but a hard and implacable expression marking his features.

"Come, come," said the kind-hearted giant. "This will never do. Come with me, Will. We must try and keep you from brooding over this sad business. Come, come with me."

"No, Pierce," replied Will, rising with an air of dignity. "I will go to no home until I have avenged this poor, slaughtered angel. I have just registered a vow upon her grave to never rest until I have sent home to her murderer's heart the bullet with which he took her life. That is henceforth my duty."

Pierce looked into the resolute face, and made no reply. He saw that it would be impossible to shake this firm resolution. And in truth, he was too deeply in sympathy with the lover's vow to wish to overcome it.

"I leave here to-night, Pierce," continued Will. "I have no clew to his place of refuge, I acknowledge. But wide as the country is it is not too wide for revenge to seek its object. If I should send for you at any time to aid me, will you come?"

"Yes; if it be to leave wife, friends, and all I have in the world behind," Pierce answered, with earnest energy.

Will warmly grasped his hand without replying, and the two friends walked slowly away from the new-made grave. That night Will left home.

A year has passed since then, yet no word has come to Pierce from his absent friend, no demand for the fulfillment of his promise. The avenger of blood is still on the trail of the murderer.

And so we leave him, with the assurance that he will yet show his work, that we may yet meet him at the death, on that day when the long-kept bullet shall find its home in the heart of the flying murderer.

As for our other friends, they are all well and happy. Robert Wetherly has settled down as the master of Brookdale, without further desire to go abroad and leave his property to the care of agents.

Lucy Darling is again in tailed at the Lindens, happy in the double fortune of having regained her estate, and having escaped her false lover.

Pierce Browning still lounges about, though fond of sport as ever. He has been, of late, very much taken with Mabel Morton, his dashing young partner in the fox chase; though he declares that he will not settle down in life until he has heard from Will Wildfire, as he knows he will yet be wanted to help out in the accomplishment of his vow.

As for Solomon Tins, and his cronies of the Golden Lion, they still smoke their long clay pipes around their blazing fire, and settle the whole affairs of the world from the shelter of a chimney corner.

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